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ELOISA JAMES

USA Today Bestselling
Author of *Fool for Love*



A WILD PURSUIT

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A WILD PURSUIT

By

Eloisa James

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Chapter 38

The First Epilogue

The Second Epilogue

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Your Wicked Ways

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For my wonderful critique partner, Jessica Benson,
who lends me her intelligent language
and her biting wit.

Readers should be aware that all the funniest lines are hers.

Chapter 1

In Which Scandal Brews in Wiltshire

Shantill House

Limpley-Stoke, Wiltshire

It is a truth universally acknowledged by women that it is far easier to dress when the point is to cover one's body, than when one desires to leave expanses of flesh delectably uncovered.

In the days of Esme Rawlings's reign over London society, it took her hours to clothe herself. She would emerge as a caterpillar from its cocoon: silky black curls gleaming over pearly shoulders, bodice miraculously suspended in air at the very moment of dropping to her waist, delectable curves swathed in a fabric so light and revealing that many gentlemen weakened at the knees at her very sight. Other gentlemen stiffened. It was all a matter of constitution.

These days it took precisely twenty minutes to throw on enough clothing to cover herself, and gentlemen in her vicinity never showed reaction beyond a sharpish discomfort at the apparition of a woman with a stomach the size of a large cannonball.

"I am plump as a pork pudding," Esme said, peering at herself in the

mirror over her dressing table.

"I wouldn't say that ," her aunt said with her characteristic drawl. Viscountess Withers was seated in a small chair, riffling through her reticule. "Drat, I cannot find my handkerchief."

"Stupendously stout," Esme said disconsolately.

"You are carrying a babe," Arabella said, looking up and narrowing her eyes. Clearly a pair of pince-nez would have come in handy, but spectacles were inconceivable, given the dictates of fashion. "I never liked the look of it. But you, my dear, might go far to changing my mind. How dare you look so delightful? Perhaps your example will finish the ridiculous habit of women confining themselves. Such a punitive word, confinement ."

"Oh pooh," Esme said, rather rudely. "I am reaching elephantine proportions. No one would wish to see me on the streets of London."

"I believe that your size is normal, not that I've had much to do with childbearing. In fact, this is the first time I have seen a woman so close to her time. So when do you expect it, my dear? Tomorrow?"

"Babies aren't like house guests, Aunt Arabella. They choose their own moment, or so I gather. The midwife seems to think it might be a matter of a few weeks." Privately, Esme thought the midwife had to be mistaken. If she grew any larger, she'd be confined to a bath chair, like the Prince of Wales when he had the gout.

"Well! Here I am, ready to help in every way!" Arabella threw out her hands as if she expected to catch the baby in midair.

Esme had to grin at that. Arabella was her very favorite relative, and not only because her reputation was as scandalous as Esme's own. "It's very kind of you to visit me, Aunt Arabella. Not to mention positively self-sacrificing in the midst of the season."

"Nonsense! One can have just as much pleasure outside of London. Even in Wiltshire, if one applies oneself. I knew that you would be quite dreary in the country all by yourself. Always struck me as a foolish habit, women rusticating themselves in the wilderness merely because they're carrying a babe. The French are much more sensible. Marie Antoinette was dancing up to the moment she gave birth."

"I suppose so," Esme said, wondering whether a black gown would diminish the look of her waist. She was no longer in full mourning,

and the idea of returning to blacks was dispiriting. But then, so was her girth.

"I took the liberty of asking just a few persons to follow me tomorrow," her aunt went on briskly. "We shall dine alone tonight, unless Stephen Fairfax-Lacy joins us in time. I suppose you know that your friend the Duchess of Girton is enceinte ? If she births a male, obviously Fairfax-Lacy will lose his title. Mind you, it was only an honorary one, but having had it for eight years at least, the man will probably feel as if he's lost his hair. We'll have to cheer him up, won't we, darling?"

Esme looked up, startled. "Fairfax-Lacy? I am not in a position to entertain a house party, particularly one which includes a man I have only the slimmest acquaintance with!"

Arabella ignored her. "And of course I've brought my dame de compagnie with me. Why be on our lonesome when we needn't? It is the season, but I fancy that my invitation outweighs any tedious little parties that might be occurring in London."

"But Aunt Arabella, this is not entirely suitable"

"Nonsense! I shall take care of everything. In fact, I already have . I brought some of my staff with me, dearest, because there are such terrible difficulties with people hired in the country, are there not?"

"Oh," Esme said, wondering how her butler, Slope, had taken this news. The extra footmen might come in handy if she was reduced to being hoisted about in a chair.

"As I said, a very few persons will follow tomorrow, just to enliven dinner, if nothing else. Of course, we won't hold any public gatherings, or perhaps only a very, very small one, because of your condition."

"But"

"Now darling," Arabella said, patting her hand, "I've brought you a basket absolutely full of the latest creams and soaps made by that Italian man, the one with the funny little shop in the Blackfriars. They are all absolutely efficacious. You must try them immediately! Your mother's skin was disastrous when she was carrying you." She peered at Esme's face. "But yours appears to be remarkable. Ah well, you always did take after me. Now, I shan't expect you downstairs until dinner. You do remember that Fairfax-Lacy is a Member of

Parliament?"

Esme was starting to have an odd feeling about the presence of Stephen Fairfax-Lacy.

"Aunt Arabella," she said, "you wouldn't be thinking of matchmaking, would you? My husband died only eight months ago."

Her aunt raised her exquisitely shaped and dyed eyebrows. "If you call me aunt again, my dearest, I shall scream! It makes me feel quite ancient. Arabella to you, thank you very much. We are family, after all."

"I would be delighted," Esme said, "but"

Arabella was never one to respect another's sentence. "It's a dreary business, being a widow. I know, as I've been one three times over." She lost her train of thought for a second and then continued. "Now, I'm not saying that I couldn't be married if I chose, because I could."

"Lord Winnamore would marry you in a heartbeat," Esme agreed.

"Precisely," Arabella said, waving her hand. "I've invited Winnamore as well; he should arrive tomorrow. But my point is, darling, that being a widow is ratherdaunting. Fatiguing, really."

"Oh, dear," Esme said, thinking that her aunt did look rather more tired than she had seen her in the past. "You must make a long visit."

"Nonsense," Arabella said smartly. "I shall stay with you for the time being. But where's the excitement in living with a woman, hmmm?"

Her wicked smile made her lose at least twenty years.

Esme grinned back. "I'll take your word for it. Miles and I only lived together for a year, and that was years ago, so I can hardly speak from experience."

"All the more reason to marry again," Arabella observed. "Now I've been thinking about Stephen Fairfax-Lacy. He's just the man for you. Lovely laugh lines around his eyes. That's important. And he's strong too. Apparently he boxes regularly, so he won't keel over in the act the way your late husband did."

"It wasn't in the act," Esme protested. Her husband had suffered an attack in their bedchamber. The fact that it had occurred during the

first night they had spent together in years was not relevant.

"Close enough. Not that we can fault poor Miles too much. After all, he got the deed done, didn't he?" She waved vaguely in the direction of Esme's belly.

"Yes," Esme said, dismissing the thought of another possible contributor to her situation.

"Fairfax-Lacy is not a man to leave you in the breech, so to speak." Arabella almost choked on her smirk.

"I'm glad you're enjoying this discussion," Esme said pointedly. "It's nice to know that my husband's demise affords someone pleasure."

"For goodness' sake, Esme, don't start taking on airs like your mother. The way Fanny wept over your father could hardly be believed. And yet she couldn't stand the fellow. Well, who could?"

Arabella began opening the jars on Esme's dressing table and sniffing each of them delicately. "This is the best of the lot," she said, holding up a small jar. "Almond paste, straight from Italy and ground by nuns. Has a glorious perfume to it. Rub it on your chest every night and it will keep your skin as white as snow!" The viscountess had never been acclaimed as a beauty, but she didn't let that fact get in her way, any more than she was allowing age to dampen her flair. Her hair had faded slightly from a fiery mass to a gingery pink, but it was swept up in an exuberant mass of curls. Her face paint could not have been more exquisitely applied: it alone took some ten years from her true age.

She put the jar down with a little thump. "Now, let's see. Fairfax-Lacy has a good strong leg, and I like his buttocks too." She rubbed a little of the miraculous almond cream into her neck. "He has plenty of blunt, not that you'll need it, since Rawlings left you well established. The point is, Fairfax-Lacy is a good man and he won't give out in the long term. Stamina, that's what you want in a man. Look at me: married three times, and not a single one of them survived past a few years."

Esme sighed. Clearly poor Mr. Fairfax-Lacy was about to be thrown in her direction until his head spun.

"We're dreadfully awkward numbers tonight, with so few men," Arabella said, patting the almond cream into her cheeks. "Yourself and I, of course, and your friend Lady Godwin, and my dame de

compagnie ."

"Who is she?" Esme asked without much interest.

"Well, poor duck, she's really my goddaughter. I don't suppose you know her. She debuted four years ago."

"But what's her name?"

Arabella fidgeted with the glass jar for a moment, looking uncharacteristically hesitant. "I shouldn't want you to tell, I can trust you to be kind to the girl. It's not as if you've a puritanical past yourself."

Esme looked up at her aunt. "Her name?"

"Lady Beatrix Lennox."

One of the most irritating things about pregnancy, to Esme's mind, was that she seemed to have no firm grasp on her memory anymore. "I'm afraid I know nothing of her," she said finally.

"Yes, you do," her aunt said rather brusquely. "Beatrix is one of the daughters of the Duke of Wintersall. In her first season, unfortunately"

"That daughter?" Now Esme remembered. She raised an eyebrow at her aunt. "I suppose you consider her your protegee, so to speak?"

"You're hardly one to talk, my girl," Arabella observed, patting her curls in the mirror. "You've made quite a few scandals yourself in the past ten years, and I'll have you know many a person considers you my protegee. Including your mama. Lord knows, Fanny has complained of my influence enough."

Esme was trying to remember the scandal. "Wasn't Lady Beatrix actually caught in flagrante delicto at a ball? I never did that."

"Naturally, I would never inquire about such a delicate subject," Arabella said, raising an eyebrow, "but perhaps you were merely never caught?"

Esme suddenly remembered a certain drawing room at Lady Troubridge's house, and kept a prudent silence.

"I'm never one to approve of the pot calling the kettle black," Arabella said, favoring her niece with a smug smile. "Poor Bea was only a baby, after all, and no mama to take charge. The duke had found some

doddering old cousin to act as chaperone, and naturally Bea was lured into a closed room by Sandhurst. Happens to girls all the time, but the father generally hushes it up. Instead Wintersail decided to make her into an example for his other five daughters, or so he had the impudence to tell me. Apparently, he told Bea she was fit for nothing more than a hothouse and gave her the address of one!"

"Oh, the poor girl," Esme said. "I had no idea." At least she herself had been safely married when she'd embarked on a life that had earned her the sobriquet Infamous Esme.

"Well, don't go thinking that she's a wilting lily. Bea can hold her own among the best of them. I'm glad that I took her after her father disowned her. She keeps me young."

Esme had a sudden thought. "You didn't do this simply to irritate Mama, did you?"

"It did have a miraculous effect on your mother's temper," Arabella said with a smirk. "Fanny wouldn't have me in her house for at least six months. Lately, I have contemplated a major renovation of my town house, if only because I could insist on staying with my sister for a time, and naturally I would bring my dame de compagnie with me."

Esme couldn't help laughing. "Poor Mama."

" 'Twould do your mother good to be around Bea for a time. The gel has a backbone of steel, and she enjoys putting people in a stir. Thinks it's good for them. Wait till you meet her, my dear. She'll go far, mark my words!"

"Oh my," Esme said, suddenly remembering her Sewing Circle and their likely reaction to Beatrix Lennox. "I forgot to tell you, Aunt Arabella, that I've become respectable."

Arabella blinked and then snorted. " You ? Why on earth would you wish to do such an odd thing?"

"I promised Miles before he died that I would avoid any sort of notoriety. He wished to live in Wiltshire, you know. I've been establishing myself among the local people, and"

"I thought it was deuced odd that you, Esme Rawlings, were whiling out your confinement in Wiltshire like some sort of milk-and-water country miss! So you've decided to change your wicked ways, have you?"

"I have," Esme said, ignoring her aunt's smirk. Arabella could smirk all she liked; Esme was determined to live the life of a respectable widow and mother from now on.

"So how are you effecting this miraculous transformation, then?" Arabella asked, having the impudence to appear utterly disbelieving. "The information might be useful in the unlikely event that I'm I'm" Arabella clearly couldn't think of any circumstances that would drive her into respectability.

Esme shrugged. "It's not so difficult. I joined the local Sewing Circle and"

But when Arabella was in the room, it was always difficult to finish a sentence. " You? You've joined a Sewing Circle ? "

She needn't hoot with laughter like that. They could probably hear her in the next county.

"I have," Esme said with dignity. "It's a very worthy cause, Aunt Arabella. We sew sheets for the poor."

"Far be it from me to get in your way! Just let me know when the ladies are descending on the house, and I'll make myself scarce," Arabella chortled. "I'll have a word with Bea as well. I daresay she'll flee into the village rather than be trapped with a bunch of seamstresses."

Esme scowled at her. "There's no need to mock me."

"I'm not mocking you, love well, not entirely. Would you prefer that I return to London and left you to the worthy matrons?"

"No!" And Esme found she really meant it. "Please don't go, Aunt Arabella. It is truly wonderful having someone here, at the moment. Not that I wish Mama could, but"

"There's nothing wrong with wishing your mama wasn't such a stiff-ramped old chicken," Arabella put in. "My sister has always been a fool. Docile as a sheep. Let you be married off to Miles Rawlings without a by-your-leave, although anyone could tell that the two of you would never suit. Fanny never did learn to say no to your father, but what's her excuse now? Your father went his way these two years, and has she come out from his shadow? No. Just as prissy as he was. The only thing that woman thinks about is her reputation."

"That's quite harsh," Esme protested. "Mama has had a most difficult life. I know she has never recovered from the death of my little brother."

"That was a grievous sorrow, to be sure. He was an enchanting lad."

"Sometimes I'm terrified for my babe," Esme confessed. "What if what if" But she couldn't finish the sentence.

"That will not happen," Arabella stated. "I won't allow it. I do wish to point out, Esme, that while your mother has experienced tragedy, she needn't have responded by becoming so highly-tighty."

"Just don't turn into her, with all your plans for propriety. Promise me that. Poor Fanny hasn't had a day in years in which she didn't find some impropriety to turn her mouth sour. That's the problem with caring overmuch about your reputation: it leads to caring overmuch about other people's reputations as well."

"I would never do that," Esme said. "I merely promised Miles that I wouldn't be a scandalous mother to our child."

"Deathbed promise, eh? I've made a few of those myself." Arabella was silent for a second.

"It wasn't exactly a deathbed promise. We had discussed how we would raise our child a few days before he died."

Arabella nodded. "It's difficult to ignore the wishes of a dead man. I agree with you." She seemed to shake off a melancholy thought. "Hey-ho for the Proper Life! Your mother will be pleased, I suppose. Actually, your ambitions are all the more reason to consider Fairfax-Lacy as a husband. He's proper enough to suit your mama, and yet he's not tiresome. Which reminds me. Such a hen party tonight. The only man in the lot will be Fairfax-Lacy, if he arrives, and even I can't see the point of dressing for a man half my age."

"He's not half your age," Esme pointed out. "He's just slightly younger. You're only fifty, and he must be in his forties."

"Too young," Arabella said firmly. "Do you know, I once took a lover who was ten years younger, and it was altogether an exhausting experience. I had to dismiss him after a few days. Too, too fatiguing. The truth is, darling, I'm getting old!"

Esme gathered her wandering thoughts just in time to answer

properly. "No!"

"Surprising, but true." Arabella looked at her reflection, but without a trace of melancholy. "I find that I don't mind very much. In fact, I rather like it. But your mother complains endlessly about her aches and pains." She turned around and fixed Esme with a fierce eye. "You are my favorite niece"

"I'm your only niece," Esme put in.

"Just so. And what I mean to say is, I want you to take life on the hilt, rather than sit back and complain about it. Not that I don't love your mama, because I do. But you've more of my blood, and you always have done."

She turned back to the mirror. "The only thing I regret about age are the wrinkles. But I have high hopes for this new almond cream! Do you know, that Italian apothecary promises the cream will make one's skin as soft as a baby's cheek? Once your child arrives, we'll have a viable comparison. Not having seen a baby in years, how would I know what its skin looks like?"

"I'm glad my condition will prove to be of use," Esme said rather tartly.

Chapter 2

A Hen Party Plus One

Stephen Fairfax-Lacy straightened his cravat and wondered, for the hundredth time, what in the world he was doing attending a house party while Parliament was in session. It wasn't just any house party either. No, in joining a flock of degenerates at Infamous Esme Rawlings's house he was missing indubitably important speeches on the Corn Laws. Castlereagh was expecting him to keep an eye on things in Parliament while the foreign secretary was off in Vienna, carving up Europe like slices of woodcock pie. There were problems brewing between the Canadian frontier and those cursed American coloniescorrection, former coloniesnot to mention the ongoing irritation of possible riots due to the Corn Laws. He had a strong feeling there would be deadly riots soon, protesting the increase in

food prices.

But he just couldn't bring himself to care. He'd spent the last ten years fighting for the good of the common man. He had never used the honorary title he held as heir to his cousin Camden, the Duke of Girton. No, he'd been elected to the Commons on his own merits. Due to his own convictions.

And where were those convictions? Ten years of battling back and forth about Corn Laws and Enclosure Acts had drained the passion out of him. Years of trying to convince his own party to reconsider its position on Enclosures. Six years ago he'd put up fevered opposition to a proposed Enclosure Act. Now another such act was presented every week. He could barely bring himself to vote. No matter what he did, more and more families were being forcibly evicted from their farmland so that rich men could build fences and graze herds of sheep. He was a failure.

He threw away the cravat, which was hopelessly creased. Generally he could make a simple trône d'amour in under eight minutes, but this evening he had ruined two cloths already. "Sorry, Winchett," he said, as his valet handed him yet another starched cloth.

He stared at his reflection for a moment as he deftly tied the neck cloth. Even if this go at the trône d'amour finally seemed to be going well, nothing else in his life was. He felt old, for one thing. Old at forty-three years old. And, damn it all he felt lonely. He knew exactly why that was. It was the visit to Cam. His cousin and wife had just returned from a visit to Greece. The duchess was radiant, intelligent, and expecting a child. And CamCam who had been forced into a marriage, and then spent ten years hiding in Greece rather than acknowledge itCam was bursting with pride.

It was Gina and Cam's sense of companionship that underscored Stephen's loneliness. He'd distinctly seen Gina, the Duchess of Girton, tell her husband to close his mouth, and without saying a word! And Cam had done it. Amazing. Cam was friends with his wife.

Stephen's mouth took on a grim line as he folded the last piece of linen. There were no women like Gina wandering around London. Not as intelligent and yet untouched, with that bone-deep innocence. Naturally, one had to have that quality in a wife. But he was just too old of forty-three. Too old for a debutante.

Finally Stephen shrugged on a coat and walked down the stairs.

Perhaps he would plead work and return to London first thing in the morning. He might even attend a ball at Almack's and acquire some fresh young thing who didn't mind what an old man he was. After all, he was a good catch, to put it vulgarly. He had a resoundingly good estate.

Of course, he hardly remembered what the property looked like, given that his work in Parliament had taken virtually all his time in the past ten years. He had a wash of longing for the lazy days of his youth, sitting around with Cam, whittling boats and fishing for trout they rarely caught. These days he fished for votes.

What I need, he thought suddenly, is a mistress. It's a lengthy business, fishing for a wife, and likely tedious as well. But a mistress would offer an immediate solution to his malaise. No doubt life had a plodding sensation because he hadn't had a mistress in a donkey's age.

He paused for a moment and thought. Could it really have been a year since he entered a woman's bedchamber? How could that be? Too many smoky late nights, talking votes with whiskey-soaked men. Had it truly been a year since Maribell had kissed him good-bye and walked off with Lord Pinkerton? Over a year ago. Damn .

No wonder he was always in a foul mood. Still, Esme Rawlings's house would be an excellent hunting ground for a mistress. He walked into the salon with a surge of enthusiasm and bowed over his hostess's hand. "I must beg your forgiveness for my importunate arrival, my lady. Lady Withers assures me that she treats your house as her own. I trust she didn't prevaricate?"

Lady Rawlings chuckled, that deep, rich laugh that had entranced half the men in London. Of course, she was great with child and had presumably curtailed her seductive activities. Beautiful woman, though. She was even more lush than he remembered, with breasts that gave a man an instant ache in the groin. In fact Stephen caught himself sharply before he formed the image. I must be getting desperate, he thought, kissing her hand.

There was something about the way Lady Rawlings's eyes met his that made him think she could read his thoughts, so he turned quickly to the lady next to her. It was shameful to be entertaining such thoughts about a woman on the verge of giving birth.

"This is Lady Beatrix Lennox," Lady Rawlings said. There was an odd tone in her voice, as if he were expected to recognize the girl. "Lady

Beatrix, Stephen Fairfax-Lacy, the Earl of Spade."

"I do not use the title," he said, bowing. Lady Beatrix was clearly unmarried but equally clearly not eligible to be his wife. A wife had to have an angelic air, a sense of fragility and purity, whereas Lady Beatrix looked like a high-flying courtesan. Her lips were like a pouting rosebud, and that rosebud never grew in nature. Given that her skin was as pale as cream and red curls tumbled down her back, those velvety black eyelashes were obviously false too.

A beauty, a seductively false beauty. He almost laughed.

Wasn't she exactly what he hoped for? A woman the precise opposite of his future bride. A woman who would likely be unrecognizable in the morning, were he ever foolish enough to spend a night in her bed. Too bad she was both well-bred and unmarried, and thus ineligible for an affair.

"Mr. Fairfax-Lacy," she said, and her voice had the practiced, husky promise of a coquette. "What a pleasure to meet you."

He brushed a kiss on the back of her hand. Sure enough, she wore French perfume, the sort that a certain kind of woman considers akin to a night rail.

"The pleasure is all mine," he said. She had high, delicate eyebrows, and the fact that she'd colored them black somehow suited her face.

Lady Arabella appeared at his side. "Ah, I see you've met my dame de compagnie" she said. "Bea, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy is quite a paragon of good works. Just imagine he's a Member of Parliament! Commons, you know."

"At the moment," Stephen heard himself say and then wondered what on earth had led him to say such a thing.

Lady Beatrix looked bored by this revelation, so he bowed again and left. He'd just caught sight of Countess Godwin on the other side of the room. Now she was a distinct possibility, given that she hadn't lived with her husband for years. Moreover, she was beautiful, in a pale, well-bred way. He liked the way she wore her hair in a nest of braids. It showed a flagrant disregard for the current fashion of dangling frizzled curls around the ears.

Unfortunately, Lady Godwin's reputation was damn near irreproachable. She would be a challenge. But wasn't that what he

needed? A challenge? He strode across the room toward her.

In the kind of serendipity that happens only too infrequently betwixt the sexes, his companion was thinking along precisely the same lines.

Helene, Countess Godwin, had watched Stephen enter the room and had been instantly struck by how remarkably good-looking Mr. Fairfax-Lacy was. He had the long, narrow face and high cheekbones of an English aristocrat. Moreover, he was immaculately dressed, a quality she considered to be of the highest importance, since her point of reference was her husband. He was bowing over Esme's hand and smiling at her. He couldn't be interested in a flirtation with Esme, could he? Under the circumstances? Men were always flirting with Esme, Helene thought with a dispirited pang. But the next moment he walked across the room directly toward her.

Helene felt a blush rising in her neck. Of course she shouldn't have been caught staring at the man, for all the world like a debutante. But it would be a pleasure to make his further acquaintance, if only because he was such a conscientious member of Parliament. Her own father said he was the best man in London on grain. More to the point, he was remarkably good-looking. His hair just brushed his neck, whereas her husband let his hair wave around his shoulders like some sort of wild animal. Oh, if only she'd married someone like Mr. Fairfax-Lacy instead of Rees, all those years ago!

But of course Stephen Fairfax-Lacy would never in a million years have eloped with someone as young and foolish as she had been. In fact, it seemed unlikely he'd ever marry. The man must be in his forties.

She sank into a curtsy before him. "I am delighted to meet you again, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy. What are you doing in the country? I thought Parliament was in session. And you, sir, are known to be the House's most determined whipper-in!" She allowed him to place her on a settee and sit beside her.

He smiled at her, but the smile fell short of his eyes. "They can spare me for a week or so," he said lightly.

"It must be rather difficult to keep up with all those issues," Helene said. He truly had lovely blue eyes. They were so respectable and clear, as opposed to her husband's muddy, scowling look.

"I don't find it difficult to follow the issues. But I'm finding it difficult to care about them as much as I used to." Stephen was feeling more

cheerful by the moment. What he needed was a woman to purge this sense that the world was gray and fruitless. Lady Godwin's bashful charm was a perfect antidote.

"Oh dear," Helene said, touching his fingers with her gloved hand. "I am sorry to hear that. I sometimes think that you are a remarkable voice of clarity in the midst of the Tories. I, sir, seem naturally inclined to Whiggery."

"I find that alarming. What is it that draws you to the enemy side?"

His eyes crinkled in the corners when he smiled at her. Helene almost lost track of their conversation. He had very long, lean fingers. Didn't that hadn't Esme told her something about a man's hands? She snatched her mind away from that vastly improper subject. "I have not found the past years of Tory government satisfactory," she said hastily.

"Oh?"

His eyes actually looked interested in what she was saying. Helene made a conscious effort to sound intelligent. "To tell the truth," she said, "I believe the government is making a huge mistake by ignoring the numbers of unemployed men in the country. The homeless, jobless soldiers wandering the roads are a reproach to all of us."

Stephen nodded and made a conscious effort to sound like a scrupulous and sympathetic politician. "I know. I wish I were convinced that a change of government would shift people's perception of the discharged soldiers." She was so slender that one really had to wonder whether she bothered to wear a corset. He'd never liked those garments, although women seemed to find them obligatory.

"I should not berate you of all men," Helene said. "Didn't I just read a speech of yours on the subject, transcribed in the Times ! And you were quite eloquent on the state of the hungry laborers."

It was appalling, how tired he was of thinking of the plight of the poor. "Thank you," Stephen said, "but I am afraid my speeches are like water on stone; they seem to have little effect."

She leaned forward. "Never say that! If good men such as yourself did not stand up for the poor and downhearted, well then, what should become of them?"

"I've told myself the same, time out of mind, but I must admit, Lady

Godwin, that I find the counsel far more engaging when spoken by such an intelligent woman." She was wearing a corset. He could tell by the way she moved toward him rather stiffly, like a marionette. It wasn't as if she had extra flesh to confine, so why on earth was she wearing that garment?

Helene pinked and realized that in her excitement she had picked up Mr. Fairfax-Lacy's hand. Blinking, she made to draw hers away, but he held it for a moment.

"It is a great pleasure to meet a woman interested in the political life of the nation."

He had a lovely voice, she thought. No wonder his speeches were so closely attended! Luckily (because she really had no idea what to say), Slope brought them both a sherry, which broke the oddly intimate feeling of the moment.

But they sat together for a moment in silence, and any reasonable observer could have noticed that Lady Godwin was slightly pink in the cheeks. The same observer might have glimpsed Mr. Fairfax-Lacy stealing a look at Lady Godwin's face, while she examined her sherry with rapt attention.

An acute observer the kind who can see into human hearts could have perceived speculation. Rampant speculation that led to a few conclusions.

Countess Godwin decided that Mr. Fairfax-Lacy had beautiful lean cheeks. She rather liked his thighs too, although she would never have formulated that thought into words. She was also still trying rather desperately to remember what it was that Esme had told her about men with long fingers.

As it happened, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy's attention was also caught by the question of fingers. Countess Godwin's fingers were slender, pink tipped and strikingly feminine. Being male, that formulation turned directly to self-interest. He liked the little flush the countess got every time she looked him in the eyes. And those fingers

One thought prevailed: how would those slender fingers feel on my body? The image brought neglected parts of his anatomy to attention. Perhaps corsets weren't such an impediment, a thought supplanted by an image of a Norse goddess, pale hair swirling over her slender shoulders, unlacing her corset with delicate fingers

Chapter 3

So Young and Yet So Diabolic

Lady Beatrix Lennox was inclined to think that she had wasted her efforts dressing. She had expected more excitement from a house party being given by the scandalous Lady Rawlings. But Countess Godwin was the only guest other than those Arabella had brought with her, and the countess didn't interest Bea. First of all, she was female. Secondly, she was prudish, proper and a strange choice of friend for the infamous Lady Rawlings. Thirdly, Bea had little patience for the martyred wife role.

Were I foolish enough to marry, Bea thought, wandering toward the windows, and were my husband as flagrantly unfaithful as is Earl Godwin, I'd take a fork to him. Outside there was nothing to see but a few stone walls with rusty ferns growing from them. She took a sip of sherry. It had a smoky sharpness that went with the gray afternoon.

A husband who invited an opera singer to reside in his wife's bedchamber obviously deserved violence. Shattered china came to mind. She would have quickly taught the man better manners.

When someone tapped on her shoulder, Bea was far away, imagining a confrontation with her imaginary husband's imaginary mistress. She spun around with a suppressed gasp. The countess herself stood before her.

They curtsied and exchanged the usual trivialities, and then the countess turned and stared at the same rusty ferns Bea had been looking at. After a second, she said, "You looked so absorbed by the view that I thought it must be magnificent. I forgot that this window looks only into the back courtyard."

Bea was feeling that pulse of wicked boredom, the one that always got her in trouble. "I was meditating on unfaithful husbands," she said, looking at the ferns and not at her companion.

"Oh?" the countess sounded startled, but not appalled. "I have one of those. I hope you're not planning to follow my example."

Bea laughed. "I have no plans to marry, and so hopefully I shall avoid

that conundrum."

"I eloped," the countess said rather dreamily. "That was the problem, I do believe. Elopement is about the intoxication of acquaintance. And acquaintance is hardly a solid basis for marriage."

"I always thought elopement was rather romantic," Bea said curiously. It was hard to imagine anyone wishing to elope with Lady Godwin, to be honest. The countess was a slender woman with stark cheekbones and a good deal of braided hair, not a look that Bea admired much. It made her look positively medieval. Plus, she was hideously flat-chested. Bea's own undergarments were cleverly designed to enhance every inch of flesh she had, as well as suggesting many inches that she didn't have, and she maintained a lively scorn for any woman who didn't avail herself of such garments.

"I must have thought elopement was romantic as well," the countess said, sitting down. "I can hardly credit it now. Of course, that was years ago, and I was a foolish girl."

Bea's mind had jumped back to her bloodthirsty fantasies. "Do you ever think of taking your husband in hand?" she asked.

"Taking him in hand?" The countess looked up at her, one eyebrow raised.

Bea's streak of mischief grew larger. Surely, listening to the countess's marital woes would be more fun than examining rusty ferns out the window. She sat down as well. "Why haven't you evicted the opera singer from your bedchamber?" she asked, precisely as if she were inquiring the time of day. This was a deliciously improper conversation, even given that Bea rather specialized in unsuitable topics. Surprisingly, Countess Godwin didn't turn a hair at her impropriety.

"Absolutely not," she said, gazing into her glass of sherry.

"I would never allow another woman to sleep in my bedchamber."

"To evict the woman in question would imply that I had an interest in entering that bedchamber."

Bea waited. She had discovered that silence sometimes inspired interesting confidences.

"If she weren't in my bed," the countess continued, "who would be

there? I think of her as a necessary evil. A nuisance because everyone is so aware of her presence. Along the lines of a bed warmer."

Bea choked. She had just discovered why the notoriously proper Countess Godwin was friends with the equally notoriously improper Lady Rawlings. "A bed warmer?"

The countess nodded, looking as serene as a dowager discussing a baptism.

Bea could see her point. If Lady Godwin didn't want to bed her husband, the opera singer might as well do the chore for her. But all the world knew that Lady Godwin lived in her mother's house, rather than in her husband's house on Rothsfield Square.

"That's not equitable," she pointed out. "You should be able to sleep in your own house. You are married to the man."

The countess cast her a sardonic glance. "Have you found that life is fair to females, then, Lady Beatrix? I think we would both sum it up as deplorable."

Until then, Bea hadn't been quite sure whether the countess remembered her scandalous past. "I don't consider my situation a deplorable one."

"If my memory serves, you were caught in an indiscretion with Sandhurst. His reputation was untouched by the scandal; yours was ruined. You were forced out of your childhood home, and"she paused, looking for the right word"ostracized by a great many people you once knew."

"But I didn't want to marry Sandhurst," Bea pointed out. "Had I married the man, I suppose it would have all blown over. I refused him."

"I admit, I thought the offer had not been made," the countess admitted. Then, after a moment, she added, "Why didn't you wish to marry him?"

"I didn't like him very much."

The countess swirled her sherry, then drank it in one gulp. "You are wiser by far than I, Lady Beatrix. I didn't discover a similar dislike until I was already married."

Bea smiled at her. "They should outlaw Gretna Green weddings, perhaps."

"Perhaps. Do you really think that you'll never marry?"

"Yes."

"And did you always feel that way?"

Presumably the countess knew as well as Bea did that no respectable man would wish to marry a person like her. Bea didn't say anything.

"Of course you thought to marry," the countess said to herself.

"Otherwise, you never would have refused Sandhurst's offer. I'm sorry."

Bea shrugged. "This is a case where dreams have been supplanted by reality. I could not tolerate a husband such as yours, my lady. I'd probably take to him with a blunt instrument. Truly, I am better off in my position."

Lady Godwin was grinning. Bea was surprised to find how enlivened her face was by humor. She didn't look boringly medieval anymore, but sparkling and quite lovely, in a slender kind of way.

"And just what would you do to my husband?" she asked with some curiosity. "And by the way, you must call me Helene. This is one of the most intimate conversations I've ever had with a complete stranger, after all." In fact, Helene was surprised at herself. There was something about Beatrix Lennox, some sort of mischievous sparkle, that reminded her of Esme. Which must explain why she, Helene, was being so uncharacteristically indiscreet.

"I would love to, as long as you call me Bea. I gather that you do not wish for your husband to play an active role in your life," Bea said, trying for a delicate tone. Subtlety wasn't exactly her strong point.

Helene laughed, a short, rather bristly laugh. "No."

"I would make him sorry, then. I would make him very, very sorry that he ever thought to leave my bed. At the same time that I made it clear he hadn't the faintest hope of returning."

"Revenge is mine?" Helene asked, eyebrow raised again. She rather liked the idea of revenge. There were whole dayssuch as the one when Rees appeared in the Godwin opera box, doxy in towwhen she

thought of nothing but doing Rees serious injury.

"Precisely," Bea nodded. "Besides, revenge is not only sweet in itself, but enjoyable. You, Lady Godwin"

"Helene."

"Helene," Bea repeated obediently. "You have the kind of reputation that the three other women in this room could only dream of. That is, if we had the desire for such dreams."

Helene looked around. True enough, Bea, Lady Arabella and Esme herself could hardly be called champions of propriety. "Esme is turning over a new leaf," she pointed out. "I believe she does indeed dream of being a proper matron, or widow, rather."

Bea shrugged. "Lady Rawlings may be aspiring to a chaste reputation, but I certainly am not. And I've seen no signs of such ambition on Arabella's part either. The point is, though, that you are the one of us who has been most flagrantly slighted by a man, and yet you are the most prudent of all of us. If I were you, I would be flaunting my affairs before my husband."

"Perhaps if he cared, I would. But Rees wouldn't give a hang, to be honest."

"Nonsense. Men are like dogs: they want the whole manger, even though they don't eat hay themselves. If you have an affair, especially one in the public eye, it will curdle his liver." Bea said it with a certain relish. It was gratifying to see how closely the countess was listening to her. "Not to mention the fact that you will enjoy yourself."

"My goodness," Helene said. Then she smiled again. "Naturally, I like the idea of curdling his liver."

"Your husband has the best of all worlds," Bea insisted. "He has that opera singer, and he has you. The world and all knows that you're faithful to him."

Helene chewed her lip for a moment. "The problem is that I'd have to have an affair in order to flaunt one," she pointed out.

"Precisely!" Bea said, grinning at her. "You have nothing to lose but reputation, and what has that got you?"

"Respectability?"

But Bea knew she had her. She paused and looked at Helene from the top of her tightly coiled braid to the tips of her slippers. Her gaze spoke for herself.

"I think they warned me about women like you when I was in the schoolroom," Helene observed.

Bea fluttered her eyelashes. "So young and yet so diabolic?"

"Something of the sort." But Helene had come down to earth with a thump. She looked back into the depths of her sherry. "It hardly signifies, because I haven't the faintest hope of attracting a man with whom to have an affair, if you must know. No one has made me an indecent proposal in years. In fact, I think my husband may have been the first, and the last, to do so." She felt a crawling mortification at the admission.

"Nonsense. Available men are everywhere," Bea said, giving her an encouraging smile.

From Bea's point of view, Helene thought glumly. She was likely propositioned every other day.

"Men do seem a bit thin on the ground at this particular party," Bea continued. "What about that politician Arabella dragged out here? I've forgotten his name." She nodded toward him.

"Mr. Fairfax-Lacy?" Helene asked. "I'm not sure that"

"I know, I know. I thought just the same: Church fathers, propriety, honor. Old Testament A boring old Puritan!" Puritan was Bea's worst insult.

"I didn't mean that! I actually find Mr. Fairfax-Lacy quite attractive, but he is unlikely to make imprudent love to me. Let alone in front of my husband. Men simply do not think of me in those terms."

Bea hesitated. She could hardly inform a woman whom she had just met that she needed a new wardrobe. "Sometimes those Old Testament types are longing for a diversion," she said. "If not, why on earth did the man take up Arabella's invitation? This is not the house party for a prudent public servant. Arabella is not interested in him for herself; she would have told me. Besides, she dislikes younger men."

They both stared across the room at Mr. Fairfax-Lacy, who was talking to their hostess.

"Do you think he knows anything of music?" Helene asked dubiously.

"What's that got to do with the price of oranges?"

"I couldn't! I'm very fond of that is, I couldn't spend my time with someone who didn't like music."

At that very moment, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy turned to the pianoforte in the corner of the room, sat down with a twinkling smile at Esme, and began to play a lively tune.

"Does he pass muster?" Bea asked. She herself had been trained on the harp, since her father considered tinkling little tunes to be indicative of ladylike thoughts.

"Not in terms of taste," Helene said a bit sourly. "He's playing one of my husband's arias. You do know that my husband writes comic operas, don't you?"

Bea nodded, even though she hadn't had the faintest idea. Helene was married to an earl. Did earls write comic operas?

"The piece he's playing comes from an opera called The White Elephant. Drrread-ful," Helene said. "Overall, the opera wasn't bad. But that particular song was absolutely dreadful."

"What's the matter with it?"

"The soprano has to sing an F in alt. The poor girl nearly strangled herself trying to reach it, and the audience thought her stays were pinching," Helene said, gazing across the room. "And the overture had so many dissonances that the orchestra sounded as if it were sight-reading the piece. Disaster. It was an utter disaster. The fact that Mr. Fairfax-Lacy liked it enough to memorize the piece doesn't say much for his taste."

But Bea had already made up her mind that Helene and the politician were a possible match, and she wasn't going to allow his inadequate musical judgment to influence Helene. "I'll walk you across the room, and you can improve Mr. Puritan's musical taste," Bea said encouragingly. "Men love it when a beautiful woman corrects them. Meanwhile we can assess whether he is worth your time and effort. He's old enough to be going soggy at the waistline, which is far worse than a lack of musical ability. Trust me on this."

"It hasn't been my experience that men enjoy correction," Helene said,

"and I'm hardly" but Bea was pulling her across the room like a determined little towboat.

Stephen looked up to find the glorious bit of disrepute, Lady Beatrix, and the graceful Lady Godwin peering over the pianoforte. His fingers almost stumbled when he realized what a mistake he'd made in choosing a piece of music, and he leaped to his feet.

But the countess was smiling at him, and there was amusement in her eyes. He gave her a wry grin.

Lady Beatrix also smiled at him, but damned if she didn't turn a normal greeting into a shamelessly wanton invitation. It was something about her eyes, the way they melted into a sultry little examination of his body and lingered around his middle. Luckily his stomach was as flat as the day he left Oxfordor was she looking lower? But the last thing he needed was a flagrant affair with an unmarried lass who already had the reputation of a highflier.

He wrenched his eyes away and looked to the countess. "Lady Godwin, I had the pleasure of hearing a canzone of yours at a musicale some years ago. Will you honor us with a composition?"

Lady Godwin gave him a reserved but genuinely friendly smile and took his place at the keyboard. "I'd be happy to play something else for you, but I rarely play my own compositions in public."

To Stephen's surprise, Beatrix Lennox didn't seem to have realized that he had snubbed her; perhaps she was so ready with her invitations that they weren't even personal. She leaned over the pianoforte, looking like a schoolgirl, an absurd comparison given that her bodice was so low that her breasts almost touched the glossy surface of the pianoforte.

"I didn't know you wrote music, Helene!" she said. "What a wonderful gift. Will you play us something you have written yourself?" And then, when Lady Godwin hesitated, " Please ?"

Stephen had to admit that Lady Beatrix was pretty damn near irresistible when she pleaded. Lady Godwin blushed and nodded.

"Would you like to hear something polished or something quite new?"

"Oh, something new!" Lady Beatrix exclaimed.

Naturally, Stephen thought to himself. That sort of flippery young

woman would always be looking for the very newest attraction.

Lady Godwin smiled. "All right. But I have to ask a favor of mine own, then."

He bowed. "For the pleasure of your music, my lady, anything."

"I'm working on a waltz at the moment, and it is so difficult to maintain the rhythm during the transitions. Would you and Lady Beatrix dance while I play?"

Stephen blinked. "I'm afraid that I haven't had much practice in waltzing."

Lady Beatrix was looking at him with one slim black eyebrow raised. "One Christmas I taught my grandfather, who is quite unsteady on his feet, to waltz," she put in, with a sweet smile that didn't deceive him for a moment.

She thought he was akin to her grandfather. Stephen felt a stab of pure rage.

"It's not a question of skill," Helene said earnestly. "I'm quite certain that you will be nimbler than my music, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy." She called to their hostess. "Esme, may I employ your guests for a practical purpose? Mr. Fairfax-Lacy and Lady Beatrix are kind enough to attempt one of my waltzes."

"I only wish I were capable of dancing myself," Lady Rawlings said cheerfully, hoisting herself from a chair and waving at her butler. A moment later the footmen had cleared a long, polished expanse down the center of the Rose Salon.

Stephen eyed it with distrust. Holding a seat in the House of Commons hadn't left him a great deal of time to spin women around the dance floor, especially in this newfangled German dance. Damn it, he'd probably only waltzed three or four times in his life. And now he had to try it before an audience. He stalked to the floor. She flitted out before him, the better to display that round little body of hers. Well, she wasn't so very little. He was a quite tall man, and yet she wasn't dwarfed by his height, as so many women were.

He glanced back at Lady Godwin. Truly, she was very attractive. She looked like a cool drink of water.

"This is so kind of you," she called. "You must tell me precisely what

you think."

Stephen snapped a bow in the direction of Lady Beatrix. "May I have this dance?"

"My pleasure," she said demurely.

If demure was the correct word. That sleepy, sensual smile of hers ought to be outlawed. It said everything, without saying anything. And yet it was more a matter of her eyes than her mouth. Why on earth was she bothering to give him, a man her grandfather's age, apparently, such an invitation? Naturally his body didn't understand that it wasn't personal.

"There's a small introduction before the waltz proper starts," Lady Godwin said. She nodded, lowered her hands and the music splashed around them.

The waltz had none of the ceremonial pacing that Stephen vaguely remembered from the waltzes he'd encountered in the past. No, it leaped from the keyboard.

For a moment he was frozen in place, already behind in the beat. Then he literally grabbed Lady Beatrix's waist, pulled her hand into the air, and plunged into the cleared space.

They galloped down the center of the room. Stephen didn't attempt a twirl; it was all he could do to keep them on time when the music suddenly broke off.

"I'm so sorry!" Lady Godwin called from the pianoforte. "I've set it far too fast. I see that now. One minute"

His companion was giggling. "You were far more agile than my grandfather." Her face was pink and her chest was heaving.

There was always the chance that her dress would fall to her waist, Stephen thought with a flash of interest. She had glorious breasts for a schoolgirl. Not that she was a schoolgirl, except in relation to his years.

"You don't seem at all out of breath," she observed.

"We'll start again, please," Lady Godwin called.

Stephen settled his hand more firmly on his partner's waist. This time

the music began more slowly, so Stephen ventured a turn. He suddenly remembered that he had once considered dancing a delight, but that was long ago, before he'd discovered politics. Now he had no time for such frivolity. The melody drove them on. It was beginning to speed up again. One Two Three! One Two Three! Faster and faster they circled and spun. Lady Beatrix was grinning like the schoolgirl she wasn't, her eyes shining with delight.

"May I offer you my compliments?" she said, obviously rather out of breath. "You keep to this rather rapid pace extremely well."

Was her compliment in respect to his age? "I should say the same to you," he said stiffly. It was annoying to realize that his hand on her waist was tingling. That he was taking huge pleasure in holding such a ripe piece of womanhood in his arms and all the time she was thinking that he was fit for the knacker's yard. It was repugnant.

Yet any man would feel a pang of interest. For one thing, he could tell from his hand on her back that Lady Beatrix did not wear a corset. His leg brushed hers as he turned her again. If this dance had been in vogue when I was young, Stephen thought suddenly, I'd be married by now. It was intoxicating to hold a woman in one's arms. No wonder all the old biddies thought the waltz was too scandalous for Almack's. This was the closest he'd ever come to lovemaking by music.

The waltz reached out and pulled them forward. It suddenly grew slower and rather melancholy, shifting to a minor key. They floated down the room on the sadness of it. That deep curve to her bottom lip was not something that could be enhanced by art, he thought absentmindedly.

"She must be putting her marriage into the music," Lady Beatrix said, meeting his eyes. "The music is so sorrowful now."

It was extraordinarily imprudent to remark to a perfect stranger about the countess's marriage! She spoke as if they were acquaintances of old, as if he were her uncle, or her infernal grandfather. And she was waiting for a response. "I would disagree," Stephen said, rather stiffly. "I'm not sure the music is sad as much as resigned."

"That's even sadder," Lady Beatrix observed.

Stephen dropped his hand from her waist the instant the music stopped. He didn't want her to think that she'd enticed him, with all her uncorseted beauty. "That was indeed a pleasure, Lady Beatrix," he said, with just the faintest touch of irony.

She caught it. Her eyelids flickered, and she gave him a languorous look that drifted down his front and made his private parts shoot to attention. "The pleasure," she said, "was entirely mine."

Damn it, she was worse than a courtesan!

Lady Godwin was rising from the pianoforte. The countess would never be so indecorous. Stephen felt his blood cool to a steady beat just watching her. The fact was, he had neglected that part of his life for too long. Now he seemed to have the unruly enthusiasm of an adolescent, lusting after every woman who crossed his path. Steady, he told himself. Steady ahead.

He strode over to Lady Godwin, took her hand and raised it to his mouth for a kiss. "That was a delightful performance," he told her softly. "Your waltz is exquisite."

"No, it isn't!" she protested. "It is far too fast. You must be quite fatigued." But she was smiling.

Stephen decided to take a chance. He turned her hand over and pressed a kiss into her palm. "Nothing you could do would ever make me tired," he told her, looking straight into her eyes.

She truly had a delightful blush.

Chapter 4

The Garden of Eden

Regular reading of the Tatler would convince anyone that English gentlewomen seduced their butlers and their footmen on a regular basis.

"This journal is a disgrace!" Mrs. Cable said, dropping the offending paper to the table. "If Lady Syndenham were indeed foolish enough to run away with her footman and I see no reason to disbelieve the report the information ought to be suppressed, so others don't follow her lead!"

Her companion's response was as frivolous as her nature. "Reading of

Lady Syndenham's adventures is not likely to prompt one to cast a lascivious eye at a footman," Esme Rawlings pointed out. "At least, not unless one's footmen were better looking than those in my household."

"There'll be no end to it," Mrs. Cable snapped. "Before we know it, impressionable young ladies will be marrying footmennay, even gardeners ! You may laugh, Lady Rawlings, but 'tis a serious concern." She stood up and gathered her reticule and shawl. "I myself am starting a campaign to weed out incorrigible sinners from my staff, and I sincerely hope you will do the same."

Mrs. Cable made a point of visiting Lady Rawlings, since the poor woman was widowed with a child on the way, but she often found her efforts unrewarding. Lady Rawlings's inclination to levity was disturbing. Mrs. Cable found herself all too often reminded that Esme Rawlings was considered something of a fast woman. Infamous Esme, that's what they used to call her in London.

All the more reason for Mrs. Cable to make frequent visits and impress the wisdom of the Bible on Lady Rawlings. Even looking at her now made Mrs. Cable uneasy. Lady Rawlings was entirely too beautiful, despite carrying a child. There was something about the color of her cheeks that looked feverish, as if she were ill. And that smile curving her lips Mrs. Cable could only hope the woman wasn't thinking about one of her footmen. Surely not! Even Esme Rawlings would never smile at such a sin.

Mrs. Cable couldn't quite articulate her thoughts, but she knew what she saw, and if Lady Rawlings were one of her maids, she'd turn her off without a reference. She herself had never smiled like that in her life. She must remember to drop off some improving tracts on the morrow.

Mrs. Cable was right.

Esme had not been thinking of her butler, a worthy man by the name of Slope. Nor had she thought of her footmen, a callow group of country lads who suffered mightily under Slope's tutelage. It was worse. She had lost track of the conversation for a moment because she was thinking about her gardener .

Esme bid farewell to Mrs. Cable. Then she sat down in her sitting room and tried to remember all the good reasons she had to be respectable. Mrs. Cable wasn't one of them. She had a sharp nose, the beady, inquisitive eyes of a swallow, and a flock of acquaintances that

rivalled that of the Regent himself. Mrs. Cable considered propriety next to godliness, and if she ever discovered the truth, Esme's reputation would be blackened the length and breadth of England.

Normally, Esme wouldn't be caught within ten yards of such a woman. But these days, she didn't have that luxury. Mrs. Cable led the Sewing Circle, an inner sanctum of ladies dedicated to the virtuous and charitable life. When the Sewing Circle was not hemming acres of coarse sheets for the deserving poor, it monitored the reputations of everyone within five counties. Manuevering her way into the circle had taken the diplomacy of a reformed rake aspiring to a bishopric in the Church of England, and Esme found the idea of forfeiting her newly acquired virtue galling.

Yet what was she to do? The gardener refused to leave her employ. Presumably, he was roaming around her garden at this very moment, although it was noon. He had likely retreated to the hut at the bottom of the apple orchard and was sitting there without a care in the world, reading Homer and not even considering the deleterious effect his presence might have on her reputation.

Of course she wouldn't visit him. This was her new life, a principled life, a life in which she would conduct herself in a respectable fashion. She had promised her husband, Miles, as much. Before he died, they agreed that he was going to give up his mistress. Lady Childe, and she was going to become the sort of woman who wore little lace caps and sewed sheets for the poor. And never, ever, thought about gardeners.

She bundled herself into a pelisse two minutes later, explaining to her maid that she wished fresh air. It wasn't as if her child was born yet, she told herself as she headed down the slope into the apple orchard. Once the child was born she would never see the gardener again. In fact, she would have her butler terminate his employment. Esme's pace quickened.

The hut was a small, roughly built structure at the bottom of the garden. It had one of everything: one chair, one bench, one table, one fireplace. One bed. And one gardener.

He was standing by the fireplace with his back to her when she pushed open the door. He didn't turn until she closed the heavy wood door with a thump. Then he whirled around so suddenly that the pot over the fire tipped and its contents cascaded across the wood floor. What appeared to be lumps of carrot and beef dripped into the cracks between the boards. Esme's stomach growled. Pregnancy had the

unfortunate effect of making her always hungry.

He looked at her without greeting, so she tried a jaunty smile. "Never tell me that you're learning to cook?"

He still didn't say anything, just took a step toward her. Her gardener was big, with a rider's body, tousled blonde curls, and eyes the blue of a patch of sky in summer. His features were as regular as if they were chiseled from marble. No man had a right to be so beautiful. He was a danger to all womankind, perhaps even to Mrs. Cable. "Did you cook that stew yourself?" she insisted, waving at the pot.

"Rosalie, in the village, brought it to me."

Esme narrowed her eyes. "Rosalie? Who is she?"

"The baker's daughter," he said, shrugging. He took another long step toward her. "Is this a social call, my lady?" Something had sparked in his eyes, something that made her heart skip and her knees feel weak.

She opened her mouth to inform him that he was shortly to be discharged from his position, and found herself saying something entirely different. "How old is this Rosalie?"

"Rosalie is a mere lass," he said negligently.

"Ah," Esme said, realizing that there was nothing she could say to that. She herself was no lass. No, she was all of twenty-seven years old, and huge with child in the bargain.

He was just in front of her now, all golden and beautiful in his rough workman's shirt. He'd rolled it to the elbow, and his forearms swelled with muscle. He was everything the smooth, delicate gentlemen of her acquaintance were not: There was something wild and untamed about him. Esme felt a shock of shyness and couldn't meet his eyes.

"My lady," he said, and his voice was as smooth and deep as that of any marquess. "What are you doing in my humble abode?"

She bit her lip and said nothing. Embarrassment was creeping up her spine. Hadn't she told him last time that she would never visit again?

"You are responsible for the loss of my meal," he said, and his hand pushed up her chin so she had to meet his eyes. He loomed in front of her, the sort of man all young girls are warned to stay away from. The kind who knows no laws and no propriety, who sees what he wants

and takes it.

"It was purely an accident," Esme pointed out.

"Then you must provide me with another." She barely caught a glimpse of the hunger in his eyes before his mouth closed on hers.

It was always the same with them. There were no words for it, really. Esme had been married. She'd had lovers. But she clung to Baring, her gardener, as if he were the first man on earth, and she the first woman. As if a smoky little hut smelling of charred stew were the famous Garden itself and she, Eve shaking in Adam's arms. And he held her with the same desperate hunger and the same deep craving.

It was a good ten minutes later when Esme remembered why she'd come to the hut. By then she was tucked in his arms and they were sitting on the bed, albeit fully clothed. "You're sacked," she said against his shoulder. He smelled of woodsmoke, and Rosalie's stew and more, strongly, of a clean, outdoors smell that no nobleman had.

"Indeed?" His voice had a husky, sleepy tone that made her breasts tingle.

"Mrs. Cable is beginning a campaign to stamp out all incorrigible sinners in the village, and surely you qualify."

"Is she a little woman who wears her hair scraped into a bun?"

Esme nodded.

"She's already tried," he said with a chuckle. "Came around to The Trout and handed out a lot of pamphlets to the lads last week. They were all about God's opinion of the Ways of the Wicked. I gather she forgot that reading is not a strong point in the village."

"Wait until she discovers that my aunt Arabella has arrived and brought a houseful of guests with her. Not a one of them has a decent reputation. Are you listening?"

"Of course." He was dropping small kisses on her neck.

"It's not a laughing matter," Esme said crossly. "You of all people should understand how important it is to be respectable. Why, only last year you were thought of as the most proper man in all the ton."

At that, he did grin. "Yes, and you can see how much that affected me.

Here I am, living in disgrace on the Continent, and a very small Continent it is," he added, glancing around his hut.

"Entirely your fault!" she snapped. Esme was starting to feel a wicked temper. "If you hadn't lurched into my bedchamber in the middle of the night, you'd still be in the judgement seat, pronouncing verdicts on all the poor disreputable souls like myself." She brooded over that for a moment. "I used to feel as if you were always watching me."

She glanced up and found he was indeed watching her. His eyes were a darkish blue form of periwinkle.

"I was."

"Not just watching. Judging."

"I had to," he said cheerfully. "I was so utterly miserable about your married state that it drove me mad."

Esme felt a slight cheer in her heart. No woman in the world would dislike hearing that. "Truly, Sebastian, what am I to do? I know you think it's foolish, but I did promise Miles that I would become a respectable wife once we had a child. I can't have one of Arabella's scandalous parties in my house. I'm in confinement! All Arabella will say is that Marie Antoinette was dancing a minuet up to the moment she gave birth."

"Why don't you just accept my proposal? I'll make an honest woman of you, and we'll turn up our noses at the gossips."

Esme's heart skipped a beat and then steadied. She scowled at him. "To begin with, I can't marry you because you are even more scandalous than I am. Half the world believes you seduced your fiancée."

"Former fiancée," he put in.

"But that is nothing to the scandal if they discovered your current whereabouts. Arabella, for one, would instantly recognize you, and she's invited any manner of persons, all of whom could also identify you."

"Mmmmm."

He wasn't paying attention. "I don't understand why you consider my wishes to be so insignificant!" she said sharply, pushing his hand off

her breast.

He just grinned down at her, all thick golden hair and laughing eyes. "Because I've given up all that respectability you want so much, Esme. I don't have it anymore. And I don't give a damn. Do you know that I once actually scolded Gina for trying to kiss me in public?"

Esme pursed her mouth. She didn't like to think about Sebastian kissing his former fiancée, for all Gina was one of her closest friends. "That sounds just like you," she observed. "Holy Willy, always standing on your consequence."

"I'd still have my Sir Sanctimonious credentials if I hadn't gotten mixed up with you," he observed. "My mother will likely faint when she hears of my new position."

"You didn't tell your mother!"

He grinned. "No. But I'm going to visit her tomorrow, and I shall."

"Noooo," Esme wailed. "You can't. You absolutely cannot do that!" She tended to keep well away from the more stiff-rumped members of the ton, such as Marchioness Bonnington. Sebastian's mother was one of those women who prided themselves on the fact that they needn't be magnanimous to lesser mortals. And her son, at least before he'd become a gardener, had been an unexceptional successor to her manifold virtues.

He shrugged. His hand was stealing up toward her breast, and his eyes had that look again.

"It will be a terrible shock for her," Esme said, trying to find a shred of sympathy and instead finding an evil ray of pleasure in her heart. "Aren't you rather old to be growing rebellious? I sowed my wild oats a good ten years ago."

Sebastian snorted. "And your mother still hasn't recovered. She's a bosom beau of my mother's, you know."

"I wasn't aware of their friendship." Esme didn't feel it necessary to add that she and her mother hadn't spoken except in passing for three years. She had no idea who Fanny's friends were. Her mother communicated only by letter, and that infrequently. "My mother has decided not to attend my confinement," she admitted. Why on earth was she relating that pitiful fact? She hadn't even told Helene.

"Your mother is as foolish as mine, then," he said, dropping a kiss on her nose.

"Fanny is not foolish," Esme felt compelled to defend her. "She simply cares a great deal for her reputation. And I've well, obviously, I've been a great disappointment to her. I am her only child."

"So you are," Sebastian said. "All the more fool she, not to be here when her grandchild is born."

"I'm afraid that my mother has quite discarded the idea of our further acquaintance." It was absurd to find that she had a lump in her throat. She hadn't even had a cup of tea with her mother for some three years. Why should she miss her now?

"Is that why you have such a fierce wish to become respectable?" Sebastian inquired. "So that your mother will accept you again?"

"Of course not! It's only because of Miles, as I told you."

"Hmmm." But he wasn't really listening. He was kissing her ear.

"I don't think my mother likes me very much," Esme said dolefully.

To Sebastian's mind, her mother's behavior had made that clear for years, but it didn't seem politic to say so. "I expect she has some affection for you," he said in as comforting a manner as he could manage, given that he had Esme's delicious body on his lap. He felt like a starving man at a feast. "I am almost certain that my mother has some affection for me, although she would never acknowledge such a thing."

"You were a perfect son to her. And you will be again. Once you return from the Continent, everyone will forget the scandal, and you can return to being the very proper Marquess Bonnington. Snobby old sobersides."

"Never again. Never !"

"Why not?"

"I shall never again believe that it matters a bean whether I kiss the woman I love in a garden or my own bedchamber. All that propriety, respectability, it's nothing but a trap, Esme, don't you see?"

"No," she said. Secretly she was a bit shaken by the vehemence in his

voice. "I wishoh, I do wishthat I hadn't been unfaithful to Miles in the first year of our marriage. Perhaps if I'd been more respectable, we could have found a way to be married again. To live together and raise a family."

She was startled by the look in his eyes. "Why? Why, Esme? Why Miles?"

"Because he was my husband," Esme said earnestly. This was at the heart of all their arguments. "I should have honored our vows," she explained.

"You vowed to love him forever. Yet you didn't even know him when you married him. He was weak, charming but weak. Why on earth are you harboring the idea that the two of you could ever have been happy together?"

"Because it would have been the right thing to do." She knew she sounded like a stubborn little girl, but he had to understand.

"Ah, the right thing," he said, and there was a dark tiredness in his voice. "I can't fight with that. But if you, Esme, were able to fall in love with your husband because it was the right thing to do, you would have been a very unusual woman indeed."

"I could have tried!" she said with a flare of anger. "Instead I flaunted my affairs before him and the rest of London."

Esme was missing the point. The trouble was that Sebastian wasn't sure how to make himself clear without risking her stamping out of his hut in a rage. He tried to put it delicately. "Your husband, Miles, didn't seem to take much notice of those affairs."

"Yes, he did."

My God, she was a stubborn woman. "You began flirting with other men in an attempt to get Miles's attention," Sebastian said. "Fool that he was, he simply concluded that the marriage was not successful. And to be honest, I don't think he cared very much. He was in love with Lady Childe, these many years before he died." His voice was calm but merciless.

Esme was silent for a moment. "We could have tried," she said finally.

"You did reconcile just before Miles died," Sebastian pointed out. "To my knowledge, you had one night together." He drew her even closer

against his chest. "Did it pass in a blaze of passion, then?"

Esme turned her face into his rough shirt. "Don't laugh at Miles," she warned. "He was my husband, and I was very fond of him."

"I would never laugh at Miles. But I would never make the mistake of thinking that the two of you could have had a successful marriage, either."

"Perhaps not. I suppose not. It's just that I'm so so ashamed of myself!" It burst out of her. "I wish I hadn't done all those things. I just wish I hadn 't."

Sebastian was beginning to kiss her again, and his kisses were drifting toward her mouth. Suddenly Esme was tired of whimpering about her miserable marriage and her reputation. "You know when you used to watch me so crossly?" she said huskily. Sebastian's large hands were leaving tingling paths in their wake. He was a beautiful man, with his honey skin and tumbling hair. She couldn't tear her eyes away from him. Why was she even thinking about Miles?

"Of course," he drawled. He was watching her now too, except his eyes were below her chin. He was watching his hand on her breast.

"You had the most arrogant, sulky look," she said. "You used to lean against the wall and frown at me, and I knew you were thinking that I was an absolute tart."

The corner of his mouth curled up. "Something like that, I suppose."

She was getting breathless because of what he was doing, but she wanted to make herself clear. "I used to do some of it for you," she said, pushing his chin up so he met her eyes.

"Do what?"

"Flirting." She smiled and put all the seductive joy she felt into that smile. "You would be frowning at me from the side of the ballroom, with that gloriously sulky mouth of yours, and I'd play for you."

"Play for me ?"

She nodded, giggling. "Be even more wanton. Do you remember when I kissed Bernie Burdett on the ballroom floor at Lady Troubridge's house party?"

"Of course," he growled, and he nipped her bottom lip with his teeth. He used to feel half mad, watching Esme Rawlings flirting with her latest conquest, allowing that intolerable Burdett to partner her in dance after dance. While he'd rarely danced with her. She'd been married, and he'd been engaged to her best friend. The very memory made him take her mouth with a growl of desire.

"Even as I kissed Bernie, I was wondering what you would do if I simply waltzed up to you and kissed you," she said after a little while, and with a catch in her voice. "I decided you'd probably be up in arms about it, prig that you are, so I kissed Bernie instead."

He raised his head for a moment. "You deliberately"

"Exactly," she said smugly. Then she ran her lips along the strong, sun-browned column of his neck. "You were so disdainful of me and yet something I thought I saw something in your eyes."

He growled again, that deep male sound that made her thighs tremble. "So you were longing to kiss me, were you?"

It was frightening to hear it aloud. Esme chose to keep silent, turning her cheek against his shoulder so he couldn't see her eyes.

"So kiss me now, then," he said. And his voice had that dark, insistent throb that she couldn't disobey. It made her feel ravishing rather than pregnant. She didn't know why she'd ever thought he was priggish: He kissed her like a wild man. With one last gasp of rational thought, she said, "But Sebastian, I meant it when I said you have to leave. Tomorrow. It's too dangerous now that a house party is arriving."

"And what shall I do for a living, eh?"

"You'll have to go back to what you did before."

"Before" His voice was dark now, velvet dark, muffled against her skin. "I spent all my time before arguing with a certain lady."

"You were extremely vexing," Esme said. "You were always scolding me because I was brazen, and"

He bent and kissed her shoulder. "Brazen," he agreed. "Improper." He dropped another kiss on the little juncture between her neck and her collarbone. "Strumpet. I'll have to lend you that pamphlet on the Ways of the Wicked."

"And all because I was having a wee flirtation with Bernie Burdett," she said, grinning up at him. "Ravishing man that he was. How I miss"

"That Bertie," he said against her mouth.

"Bernie!"

"Whatever," he growled. "The pain he caused me!"

She reached up and put her hand to his cheek. "Bernie and I never had an affair. It was a mere flirtation."

"I know that." He smiled down at her then, a lazy, dangerous smile. "Bertie would have made a tedious lover." He dragged his lips over the sweetness of her cheek and the long delicate stretch of her neck. "And you, my darling Esme, are not a woman to tolerate tedium in your bedchamber."

"And how would you know, sir?" she said, sounding a little breathless. "You have something of a lack of experience in these matters, wouldn't you say?" It was one of the most joyous memories of her life when the beautiful Marquess Bonnington threw off his cravat in Lady Troubridge's drawing room, announced he was a virgin, and proceeded to lose that virginity.

"It would be no different if I were Adam himself, and you Eve," he said. His eyes were burning again. "No one can make love to you the way I do." His hands slipped from her shoulders to her breasts, shaped their exuberance in his hands. She arched up with a gasp. His knee nudged her legs apart, and with one swift motion, he pulled her to the end of the bed, where he would put no weight on her belly.

Then he was there, bending over her, and she was laughing, and to him, it felt as if there were only the two of them in the world. He and his intoxicating, ravishing mistress, his very own Esme, his infamous lover

As if his garden were the first garden itself.

As if his Esme, with her plump mouth and her seductive wit, were the very first woman in the world. She moaned, and he shook with desire. Took up a rhythm that he knew drove her to distraction, made her whimper and grow incoherent. Standing there, making sweet, slow love, he was the only man in the world or the first it didn't matter.

Marquess Bonnington was well and truly ravished.

Chapter 5

Anticipation

Stephen had made up his mind to approach not seduce Lady Godwin. One couldn't use a disreputable word of that sort in respect to such a delightfully ladylike woman. He organized his campaign in the same orderly fashion with which he approached all important arguments undertaken in Parliament.

First, Helene Godwin had eloped at age seventeen, which surely indicated a certain unconventionality, even if she showed no signs of it now. Second, the lady's husband proved to be a reprobate, tossing his wife out the front door and establishing a changing show of young women in her bedchamber. Nonetheless, third, the lady had maintained an irreproachable reputation. She would not be an easy woman to win. But, finally, he fancied that he did have a chance of winning. A long shot, perhaps, but that blush She blushed whenever she saw him.

Stephen grinned to himself. He was used to assessing the odds of any given victory in the House. He gave himself a forty percent chance of victory over Helene. Sufficient odds to make it a challenge. Already he felt much more himself than he had in the last few months. Enclosure Acts just weren't enough to keep a man's interest. He had been suffering from a healthy dose of lust.

A deliciously bashful countess, intelligent, musical and neglected by her husband, would solve all his problems.

He strode into Lady Rawlings's Rose Salon and paused for a moment. The house party had apparently been augmented by neighbors of Lady Rawlings; country gentlefolk drifted around the room in little groups. The countess was sitting next to the fireplace, talking to their host. Her skin was so pale that it looked translucent. Frosty, almost. Like snow or ice. Stephen loved ices, sweet and cool to the tongue.

He was far too adept a campaigner to approach Lady Godwin immediately. Instead he walked over to greet an old friend, Lord Winnamore, whom he knew well from various skirmishes between the Houses of Lords and Commons.

Winnamore was as amiable as ever. "Another escapee from matters of business, I see," he said, greeting him.

"I should be in London," Stephen admitted. Come to think of it, what was Winnamore doing in the deeps of Wiltshire?

"Life has a way of creating distractions," Winnamore said. He was watching Lady Arabella.

"Thank goodness!" Stephen was startled by the vehemence of his own exclamation. It certainly wasn't as if he ever would consider deserting the House before his term was up. Or even at that point. There was no threat to his reelection, after all.

"This isn't the sort of party where I'd have thought to meet you," Winnamore said, giving him a shrewd glance over his spectacles.

"I am finding it quite enjoyable," Stephen said, checking to make certain that Lady Godwin was still in the corner. In another moment, he would stroll in that direction.

"Enjoyable, yes. Respectable, no. Have you met Lady Beatrix yet?" Winnamore said cheerfully, looking at the door to the salon. Stephen looked as well. Lady Beatrix was making what she clearly considered a spectacular entrance. Apparently the curls of yesterday had been compliments of a curling iron; today her shining copper hair was straight as a pin. Yesterday, her skin had been sunkissed; tonight it was pale as snow. Yesterday her lips had been ripe as a cherry; tonight they were a pale, languid pink. Even her pert expression of the previous night had been replaced by a faintly melancholy gaze except if one looked very, very closely, mischief brewed.

"That young woman is a work of art," Stephen said, not without admiration.

"A lovely child, in fact," Winnamore said. "She is a great comfort to Lady Arabella."

Stephen could think of no reason why Lady Arabella, known far and wide for her three marriages and various other dalliances, would have need of comfort, but he kept prudently silent. Besides, Lady Arabella herself swept up to them that very moment.

"Mr. Fairfax-Lacy," she cried, taking a grip on his elbow, "I must insist that you greet my niece. Dear Esme is not as nimble as she is normally, and so I have appointed myself the duty of bringing

sufficient conversationalists to her side."

It was suddenly quite clear to Stephen why he had been invited to this particular house party. Lady Arabella had selected him as a prospective husband to her niece. Well, there was nothing new in that. Matchmaking mamas had been chasing him for years.

He bowed to Lady Rawlings but sought Lady Godwin's eyes as he did so. She was just as lovely as he remembered, pure and delicate as she couldn't think. Poetry was hardly his forte. She was blushing again and looking rather adorably shy.

Too shy. A moment later she jumped to her feet like a startled gazelle and fled across the room. He'd have to go even slower than he had planned. He didn't look over his shoulder at the countess, but sat down next to Lady Rawlings.

For her part, Esme was watching Stephen Fairfax-Lacy with a good deal of interest. Unless she was mistaken (and she was never mistaken when it came to men), the man was attracted to Helene. Marvelous. Poor Helene had suffered so much from the cruelties of her careless husband. A kindly, handsome, respectable man such as Mr. Fairfax-Lacy would do wonders to restore her sense of confidence and allow her to hold her head high before that reprobate of a husband.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" she asked, remembering rather belatedly that she was nominally, at least, a hostess. Arabella had taken over all the duties of running the house, the better for Esme to concentrate on her supposed confinement. "Is your chamber acceptable?"

"Truly, it has been all that is comfortable," he said. And then changed the subject. "I much enjoyed Countess Godwin's waltz. Her husband is not invited to this gathering, I presume?"

Yes ! Esme felt all the exuberance of an old friend. Helene appeared to have made a remarkable impression on Fairfax-Lacy. "Absolutely not," she hastened to say. "Helene and Rees have had little to do with each other for years. He has other interests. She and her husband have an entirely amiable friendship," she added. One wouldn't want the M.P. to be frightened off by the notion of an irate husband.

Stephen was watching Helene talk to Bea on the other side of the room. Esme didn't quite like the contrast that conversation presented: Bea was such a vividly colored young woman that she made Helene look pale and washed out. "If you'll excuse me," she said brightly, "I must confer with my butler." She allowed Fairfax-Lacy to haul her to

her feet and then trundled off toward the door, stopping next to Helene and Bea.

"He was just asking for you!" she whispered to Helene. Helene looked adorably confused. "Who was?"

"Fairfax-Lacy, of course! Go talk to him!" Helene looked across the room, and there was Stephen Fairfax-Lacy smiling at her. But she felt a strange reluctance; it was all she could do to hover next to the door and not flee to her bedchamber. Her life, to this point, had not been easy. In fact, although she only admitted it to herself in the middle of the night, sometimes she felt as if she must have been cursed at birth. It had only taken one foolish decisionthe foolish, foolish decision to elope with an intoxicating man by the name of Reesto ruin her entire life. But in the last year she had realized that if she didn't do something about it now, the rest of her life would follow the pattern of the past seven years. The years hadn't been unpleasant: She lived with her mother and she was welcome everywhere. But she had no life, no life that mattered. No child .

She glanced again at Fairfax-Lacy. He looked like a gentleman, not like that savage she had married. Perhaps, just perhaps, she would even like having intimacies with him. It wouldn't be terrifyingly messy and embarrassing as it had been with Rees. It would be proper. Acceptable. He was quite lovely: all rangy, lean, English gentleman. And without a doubt it would curdle Rees's liver to see her with such a man. If anything could curdle her husband's liver, given the qualities of brandy he drank. So why wasn't she walking straight into Mr. Fairfax-Lacy's arms?

Suddenly a pert voice spoke just at her left elbow. "Shall I walk you across the room again?"

Helene blinked. Bea's eyes were sparkling with mischief. She repeated. "Shall I walk you across the room, Helene? Because I believe you are expected."

"Ah"

"This way," Bea said efficiently, taking her elbow and strolling toward the far end of the room, where Stephen waited. "He is quite lovely, isn't he?"

Helene was so nonplussed that she couldn't quite bring out an answer. "Who?" she finally said lamely.

"Mr. Fairfax-Lacy, naturally!"

"I thought you found him Old Testament."

"That too. But it seems obvious to me that the two of you are perfectly suited," Bea said in a coaxing voice, as if she were taking a mare over a high jump. "There he is, a perfect specimen of the English gentleman, and here you are, exactly the same in a female form. Both impeccably virtuous too, which must add luster to your friendship. And I think he's quite, quite interested in you," Bea said confidentially. "He looked straight in your direction when he entered the room. Whenever I speak to him, he simply glances around the room. Normally" her smile grew "I am used to complete attention."

Bea had on a dinner dress that had neither a front nor a back. One could only guess how it stayed above her waist, given that her plump little breasts threatened to escape her scrap of a bodice. Men must simply slaver over her, Helene thought enviously. She herself was wearing a gown of Egyptian net over a dark blue silk. She had felt very a la mode in her chamber, but now she felt dismally overdressed, like a dog wearing a sweater.

But Bea seemed to follow her train of thought perfectly. "I'm certain that he doesn't like my gown," she said. "Last night at dinner he kept looking at me as if I had something stuck between my teeth. Come along!" She jiggled Helene's arm. "You don't want to wait too long, do you? What if Arabella manages to convince the man that he should wed Lady Rawlings? You could hardly have a liaison with your friend's husband!"

Helene thought about that as they moved across the room.

"You see," Bea said, not quite as softly as Helene would have liked, "he's looking at you right now!"

But when Helene looked up, it seemed to her that Stephen was watching her companion, although with an expression of deep annoyance. She swallowed and curtsied before Stephen Fairfax-Lacy. "Sir," she said. Bea had glided away without even greeting Mr. Fairfax-Lacy.

He smiled down at her, and Helene realized again what a good-looking man he was. There wasn't a whisker on his face, not like her husband, who always had a shadowed jaw by evening.

"How are you?" he asked.

"I'm quite well."

There was a moment's silence while Helene thought desperately of a conversational tactic. "Did you read this morning's paper?" she finally asked. "Napoleon has escaped from Elba and is in France again! Surely the French army will not support him."

"I believe you are quite correct, Lady Godwin," Stephen said, looking away. He had decided to play this game very, very slowly, so as not to startle her.

Helene felt a crawling embarrassment. How on earth could she have ever thought to seduce a man? She couldn't even carry on a simple conversation.

"What do you think of the fact that Catholics cannot sit in Parliament?" she asked.

He blinked, not prepared for philosophical reasoning. "I have long felt that the prohibition should be rethought," he said finally.

"I believe it has to do with the wordings of the oaths they would have to take. Wouldn't it violate their religious vows to take Parliamentary oaths?"

"Most of the men I know don't give a fig for those oaths," Stephen said.

Helene heard a faint bitterness in his voice and wondered about it. Why was Mr. Fairfax-Lacy in Wiltshire rather than sitting in the House of Commons?

"Why should we expect Catholics or Jews to be more circumspect than Anglicans?" he continued.

"Surely to establish oneself as a Catholic in this country, given its Anglican past, implies a deeper fidelity to religion than one might expect from an ordinary gentleman," Helene said. She was quite enjoying herself now. He wasn't regarding her in a lustful fashion, just with the sort of normal engagement one might expect during a conversation.

But she waited in vain for a reply. He appeared to be looking over her shoulder.

"Mr. Fairfax-Lacy," she said, with a bit of sharpness to her voice.

He snapped to attention. "Yes, Lady Godwin? Do forgive me."

"Is there something interesting that I should see as well?" Helene said, deciding on the basis of his really quite charming smile that she wasn't insulted after all.

"It is merely that impudent little chit, Lady Beatrix," Stephen said. "I truly can't imagine what Lady Withers is thinking, allowing the girl to dress in that unseemly fashion."

Helene turned as well. Bea was sauntering across the room toward them.

Stephen felt as if the girl were some sort of irritating gnat. Here he was, having a remarkably informed and intelligent conversation with the woman who might well become his future mistress, and there she was again. About to interrupt their fascinating discussion of religious oaths. Lady Beatrix seemed to have dropped the melancholy pose with which she had originally entered the room. She looked strikingly exotic and utterly unnatural. And potent. Too potent.

"Do you know, I don't think that is the true color of her hair?" Stephen said. He could hear the rancor in his own voice. Why on earth did the girl get under his skin in such a fashion? "Look at that bronze. Have you ever seen such a color in nature?"

"But why would she color her hair?" Helene asked with some fascination. "She can hardly be showing gray."

"Of course not!" he agreed. "She's barely out of the schoolroom."

Helene didn't agree with that pronouncement. Beatrix Lennox was obviously far too ripe for a schoolgirl, and besides, hadn't she debuted some three years ago? That would put her at about twenty years old.

"I expect she colored her hair merely to shock people," Stephen said with a shrug. "She's obviously artificial." He turned back to her. "Not like you a true English gentlewoman, bred to the bone."

Helene felt a pang of envy toward Bea. It wasn't high on her list of wishes to be described as a well-bred filly at Tattersall's. Naturally, she ought to be pleased by the compliment. But it would be fun if just once, she were considered dangerously attractive. Able to shock someone. Helene had never shocked anyone in her life. Well, perhaps her husband. There was that time with the chamber pot Helene wrenched her thoughts away from the unsavory topic.

"Thank you for the compliment," she said, opening her fan. Esme always flirted with her fan to great effect. Unfortunately, Helene hadn't the faintest idea how to do the same thing. She waved it gently, but the only result was that she was unable to see Stephen at all. She snapped it closed.

At that moment Bea joined them. "We have been discussing poetry," she said with a twinkle. "And I am sent to discover each person's favorite poem. Arabella has had the splendid idea that we shall have a poetry reading on Friday evening."

"I haven't read any poetry in years," Stephen observed.

Bea looked up at him from under her lashes. "We'll have to do something about that. Perhaps I'll lend you a book from my private library."

To Helene's amazement, a ruddy tone appeared in Stephen's lean face. "That won't be necessary," he said brusquely. "I was quite fond of poetry as a boy. I'm certain I can remember something."

"Have you a favorite poem?" Bea asked Helene.

"I am acquainted with Shakespeare's sonnets," Helene said uncertainly. "But some of them are hardly suitable for reading aloud."

"I'm sure you will find something you deem appropriate," Bea said, and Helene was unable to dismiss the idea that the girl was laughing at her.

"And your favorite poem?" Stephen asked her.

"A love poem by Lord Byron," Bea said, drifting away. "It's quite, quite beautiful."

"That girl is trouble," Stephen said, rather unoriginally.

But Helene had had enough of this torturous flirtation. She was exhausted. "If you'll excuse me, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy," she said with a curtsy, "I will join Lady Rawlings."

Helene had hardly sat down next to Esme when Bea plumped herself on Esme's other side. "Disastrous!" Bea announced.

"What?" Helene asked, but Esme seemed to know precisely what she was speaking about and responded with a choked giggle. Helene

narrowed her eyes. "What are you discussing?"

"You, darling," Esme said, with such fondness in her voice that it removed the sting. "Bea and I have been conspiring to bring you together with that estimable gentleman on the other side of the room, but you're not doing your share."

Helene already felt tired; now she felt obstinate as well.

"While I much dislike the idea of my affairs being discussed in public," she said, "I also resent the imputation that I have not attempted to to sway Mr. Fairfax-Lacy's attentions. I am wearing a new dress, and I allowed myself to be walked over to him, like a lamb to slaughter. It is not my fault that the man has no conversation."

"You must have discussed something," Esme said.

"Topics I introduced," Helene snapped. "First I brought up Napoleon's escape and then the position of Catholics in the government. He had nothing to say to either issue. Really, if this is what he's like in Commons, it's no wonder the government never gets anything done!"

Bea sighed. "He doesn't want to talk about legalities, Helene. The man is bored with the House. He wants to talk about frivolous things. Men always pretend that they want intelligence in their mates, but it's not really the case."

"What sort of frivolous things?" Helene asked.

"I don't agree," Esme put in. "I think Bea has the wrong end of the stick. In my experience, it doesn't even matter what you talk about. The man is burnt to the socket. Look at those circles under his eyes. Unless I miss my guess, he's rather desperately hoping to find a warm body to curl up with. AH you have to do is indicate that interest, Helene."

"You make it sound easy," Helene muttered.

"It is easy," Bea said. "You watch, and I'll do it right now. He's utterly uninterested in me, so there's no threat to your future."

Helene grabbed her arm. "I can't let you do that!"

"Why on earth not? I do it enormously well," Bea said with some satisfaction. "In fact, I think one could fairly say that I am an expert." She sauntered off, and sure enough, even the very sway of her hips

was a promise.

"I do believe that girl is more outrageous than I ever was," Esme said thoughtfully. "She must be quite unhappy."

"Nonsense. She's having the time of her life," Helene said. "Look at her now!"

Bea was laughing up at Stephen, waving her fan gently before her face. Her piquant little face was glowing, her eyes sending the man a speaking invitation. Her bosom brushed against his arm, and even from the other side of the room, Helene could see him start.

"I can't possibly do that sort of thing," Helene said flatly. "I just couldn't." She felt positively riddled with embarrassment at the very thought.

"Bea is not doing much," Esme said. "There's only one important thing, and that's to let your eyes tell Stephen that you're available. That's all. It's easy."

"Easy?" Helene said in an appalled voice. "That's not easy! Available ? How on earth does one indicate such an unseemly thing?"

Across the room, Bea was laughing up at Stephen. She seemed to be vibrating with desire. Then she turned around for the merest moment and grinned at them. The desire wiped from her face and was replaced by pure mischief. She looked like a girl just out of the school room. The next second she turned around and threw Stephen another languishing look.

"Ah," Esme said with some satisfaction, "she can still be herself."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Helene said, feeling just on the edge of tears. "I can't do this. I must be missing the ability. Rees always said" She snapped her mouth shut. She didn't want even her own best friend to know that she was a frigid woman who would never enjoy bedding a man. Her own husband had said so, and she was fairly certain he was right.

"Don't despair, darling. Mr. Fairfax-Lacy doesn't like what Bea is doing. See?"

Sure enough, Fairfax-Lacy was frowning at Bea and clearly growling some sort of reproach. "He's just the man for you," Esme said with satisfaction. "Not Bea's type at all."

A fact which Bea exuberantly seconded a moment later. "He told me to go wash my face," she reported with some glee. "I do believe that Mr. Higher Than Thou M.P. doesn't like my maquillage, even though it is imported all the way from Paris."

Helene felt a little steadier. She had never worn rouge in her life and couldn't imagine why she ever would. Perhaps she and Stephen were suited after all.

Just look available, she told herself. "So, I simply look look"

"As if you want to bed him," Bea said.

"I'll try," Helene muttered. Never mind the fact that she didn't wish to bed anyone, and couldn't believe that any woman would wish to do so voluntarily. Except for reasons of revenge.

"Or you could just tell him," Bea suggested with a wicked grin.

"I most certainly could not!"

"I have an idea! The poetry! We'll use the poetry."

"What do you mean?" Esme asked her.

"We are each supposed to read a favorite poem on Friday, remember? If Helene reads the right kind of poem, and looks at Fairfax-Lacy while she does it, it won't fail! That way you need not embarrass yourself," she told Helene. "The poem will do it all. And I'll warrant he'll visit your chamber that very night."

"An excellent idea," Esme said, nodding.

"But I don't know any love poetry," Helene pointed out. "Besides that of Shakespeare."

"Good," Bea interjected, "because we don't want love poetry, silly!"

"We don't?"

"Do you love him?" she asked.

"Well, no."

"Precisely my point. This is an altogether different type of poetry. And not to worry, I never travel without my favorite authors."

"You are remarkable. You travel with with this sort of poetry all the time?" Helene asked Bea.

"Naturally," Bea said, opening her fan.

Helene watched with fascination as Bea shook the delicate, lacy confection slightly. She held it just below the level of her eyes, and somehow she looked ten times more delectable. I shall practice with my fan tonight, Helene thought. In front of the mirror. If I read the poem with a fan covering my face, no one can see me blush. Helene loathed the fact that she blushed constantly, like some sort of green girl.

"Don't forget that your friendship with Mr. Fairfax-Lacy will curdle your husband's liver," Bea said with relish.

"Of course I haven't forgotten that!" Helene said. Why on earth would she even consider doing such an immoral act otherwise?

"Just remember to look at Stephen while you read," Esme advised. "I shall put the two of you next to each other at supper so you can practice giving him desiring looks. Naturally I'll have to be on his other side, since Arabella is determined that we should marry."

"I rather agree with Arabella," Helene said. "He would undoubtedly make a good husband, Esme. I was just thinking how very much I wish that I had married someone like him, rather than Rees."

"He's not for me," Esme said, shrugging.

"Nor me," Bea said, with the little yawn of a cat. "He's all yours, Helene. If you can stomach all that virtue and pomposity, that is."

"He's not pompous!" Helene protested, and then realized that her two friends were laughing at her.

"Not pompousperfect for you. We'll confer over poetry tomorrow, shall we?" Bea said, a twinkle in her eye.

"Better not," Helene said, biting her lip. "If I have to read something shocking, and"she narrowed her eyes at Bea"I have the feeling that your choice will be along those lines, I'd much rather not know the worst before the moment arrives."

Esme put an affectionate arm around her shoulder. "I'll be there, cheering you on."

"As will I!" Bea put in brightly.

Helene looked at Stephen Fairfax-Lacy again. He was leaning against the mantelpiece, deep in conversation with a stout lady from a neighboring estate. He was the very picture of a timeless kind of elegance. The kind of elegance that her husband didn't even dream of. Rees didn't give a toss what coat he drew on in the morning. He'd never tied a cravat in such intricate, snowy folds in his life. And since no decent servants would stay in his employ, he didn't have a gentleman's gentleman to tie it for him.

Stephen Fairfax-Lacy was just what she needed: an antidote to her loathed husband. Rees's antithesis. Helene's hands curled into fists at her sides. She would do it. She would do it, and then she would tell Rees that she had. And when he looked stricken with jealousy

The smile on Lady Helene Godwin's face reflected pure feminine glee.

When Rees was stricken with jealousy and suffering from a curdled liver she would just laugh and walk away.

Chapter 6

The Contrariness of Men Hardly Bears Repeating

Bonnington Manor

Malmesbury, Wiltshire

Marchioness Bonnington was not accustomed to opposition from the male sex. She had ruled and survived two husbands and fourteen male lapdogs. To her mind, there was no question as to which group had provided the better companionship. And as for logic her own son was an excellent example of the worthiness of lapdogs over humans.

"Did I understand you to say that you are living in a garden hut, Bonnington? A garden hut?"

Her son nodded. The marchioness let silence fall between them. She had not invited him to sit, since she considered sons to be inferiors,

along the lines of a butler: willing to take advantage, and needing to be continually reminded of their place. Not that her only son Sebastian had ever shown much proclivity for rebellion. He was a quite appropriate example of his sex, if she said so herself. Never caused her a moment of worry, until she had heard he had been courting the Duchess of Girton and persuading her to seek an annulment of her marriage.

That had ended in disaster, as she had known it would. In the end, her only son had been exiled to Europe, labeled unmarriageable, tarred as a liar and deceiver. The only thing that had sustained her in the past eight months had been a lifetime's knowledge that the sins of young, very wealthy men seemed to dissolve after a year or so. She had fully intended to recall him to England in the summer and rehabilitate him in the eyes of the ton by marrying him to an upright young woman, perhaps someone who reminded her of herself at an earlier age.

Except here he was. Back in England without her permission.

She placed her hands carefully on top of her walking stick, which was planted in front of her chair. "May I ask why you have chosen such an insalubrious location in which to lodge?" she asked gently. Neither of them was deceived by her tone. The marchioness tolerated insubordination in no one.

"I am living in a garden hut, Mother," her son said now, smiling at her for all the world as if he were a natural rather than a marquess, "I am living in a garden hut because I am working as a gardener on the estate of"

She raised her hand. "I do not wish to hear her name spoken out loud."

He looked at her and said, "On the estate of Lady Rawlings, Mother, the woman whom I shall marry."

Of all possible outcomes to her son's disastrous impudence, this was the worst.

"I cannot fathom it," she said, punctuating each word with vigorous disapproval. "I understood when you were courting the Duchess of Girton last year. I was as aware as anyone that Ambrogina Camden's marriage was not consummated. She was a respectable woman, an excellent choice for marchioness, if one could disregard the unfortunate annulment that would have had to occur." She paused and gripped the carved top of her walking stick even harder.

"As I say, I understood your wish to marry her. Marriage to a duchess, even one who has annulled her previous marriage, can never be seen as a mistake. But marriage to Esme Rawlings isis beyond myI cannot fathom it. The woman took lovers under her husband's nose. Everyone in London knew what she was up to. Her own mother has publicly expressed horror at her behavior. I was never so surprised as when I heard that Lady Rawlings was actually entertaining her husband in that bed of hers; Lord knows all of London had been there at some point or other."

"If you repeat that comment one more time, you'll never see me again." His voice was calm, but the fury there made the marchioness blink.

She rallied quickly. "Don't be a fool!" she said sharply. "In my estimation, the gossip probably didn't cover half of what she did. I know for a fact" Her eyes widened, and Sebastian saw that she had only just grasped the full ramifications of the situation.

" You to marry her! You , who killed her husband?"

"I did not kill her husband," Sebastian said, standing taller. "Rawlings's heart failed him on my unexpected entry to the chamber."

"You killed her husband," his mother said. "You entered that room looking for the bed of your duchessoh, don't give me that folderol about a false wedding certificate. I don't believe common gossip. You had been bedding the duchess, but you crawled into the wrong bedchamber and encountered a husband. I call that killing the man! In my day"she said it with grim triumph"a man ascertained whose door he was entering before he did so."

Sebastian suppressed a grimace. "I mistook the room," he said stolidly, "and it had an unfortunate effect."

"Then why in the name of blazes should you marry the woman? A mistaken notion of paying for your crimes? If so, I shall have the vicar speak to you. Because one can overemphasize the doctrine of reconciliation, and marrying a doxy simply because one killed her husband is Going Too Far."

Sebastian sighed and looked about him. He was tired of standing like a schoolboy before his mother. She was perched on a thronelike chair in which the Regent would have felt comfortable, fitted out with claw feet and serpentine arms. He spotted a reasonably comfortable chair in the corner and strode over to fetch it.

"What are you doing?" his mother barked. "I didn't give you permission to sit down, Bonnington!"

"My name is Sebastian," he said, putting down the chair with a decisive thump and seating himself directly before her. "My name is Sebastian, and I am your son. Your only son. It would make me feel a great deal more comfortable if you did not refer to me as having killed Lord Rawlings. He had a weak heart, and the doctor had given him until the end of the summer. It was truly unfortunate that I was the cause of his seizure and I would give anything to have not instigated that episode. But I did not kill him."

The marchioness blinked. Her ever-courteous, ever-proper, almost boring son appeared to be showing a little backbone for the first time in his life. She didn't know whether to be pleased or horrified.

She chose horrified.

"The only man with whom I have ever been on a first-name basis was your father," she said with some distaste, "and that only in the most intimate of situations. You, Bonnington, are my son, and as such should offer me only the greatest respect."

He inclined his head. "And that I do, Mother." But he stayed seated. He had her looks, that son of hers. When she was young, men wore their hair powdered and women wore patches. But it would be a pity if Sebastian powdered his hair. He had her hair, the color of sunshine, that's what Graham called it. Of course, Graham hadn't been bad-looking either. Those were his deep-set eyes looking at her. After her first husband died, she had married the most handsome man in London, and if Graham Bonnington wasn't a lively conversationalist, he knew his place. He listened to her. She said enough for both of them.

She thumped her stick on the floor. The stick made some of the younger servants quite ill with anxiety, but her son merely glanced at the floor, as if checking for scuff marks. She decided to stay with the most crucial point.

"You cannot marry a doxy out of some misplaced sense of obligation. The Bonningtons are an ancient and respected family. Make Lady Rawlings an allowance, if you must. The estate can certainly bear the cost."

"I intend to marry her," Sebastian said. "But not out of obligation."

"No?" She invested the word with as much scorn as she could.

"No. I love her."

The marchioness closed her eyes for a moment. The day had begun with the unpleasant shock of seeing her son in England, and it was rapidly turning into something truly odious.

"We don't marry out of love," she sat flatly. "Marry a decent woman, and you can always see about Lady Rawlings later."

"I love her, and I will marry her."

"I believe I have fallen into a comic opera. And I detest musical theater. Are you planning to break into song?"

"Not at this moment."

"Let me see if I understand you: you feel yourself to be in love with a doxy who has shared her bedchamber with half the men of London, and whose husband you didn't kill, but certainly helped to his grave?"

"This is your last warning, Mother." He said it through clenched teeth. "You speak of the woman I intend to marry, who will be marchioness after you. Speak so again, and you will have no part in our life."

The marchioness rose with some difficulty the gout in her left foot was growing worse by the moment and thumped her stick for good emphasis, although it seemed to have little effect. She was pleased to note that her son rose when she did. At least he hadn't discarded all manners.

"The day you marry that doxy, I shall disown you," she said, as if she were commenting on the weather. "But I am quite certain that you knew that would be the outcome. I may remind you that my portion is not inconsiderable. Any child you"

Sebastian groaned inwardly. The other shoe had dropped.

"By God, the woman is enceinte ! I'd forgotten that trollop is carrying a child. Tell me you are not planning to marry Esme Rawlings before that child is born !"

Sebastian toyed with the idea of threatening to marry Esme tomorrow, an action that would make her unborn child his heir. But he didn't want to be responsible for his mother having heart palpitations. Miles

Rawlings's death already weighed heavily on his conscience. More to the point, Esme still refused to marry him at all.

"Lady Rawlings has not accepted me," he admitted.

A look of grim satisfaction crossed his mother's face. "Well, at least someone is showing intelligence. Of course she won't accept you. You killed her husband." She began to stomp her way toward the door. "I don't know where you got this devilishly self-sacrificing side to you. Your father didn't show any penchant for that sort of nonsense."

Suddenly Sebastian felt his temper, which had been growing at a steady rate, flare into life. He walked around his mother and stopped before the door.

"Move aside!" she said.

"I will make Esme Rawlings marry me. She will accept me because she loves me as well. Moreover, I shall expect you to attend the wedding and behave in a respectable fashion."

"There won't be a wedding," his mother replied calmly. "I felt a momentary anxiety, true. But from what I know of her, Esme Rawlings is as intelligent as she is dissolute. She won't marry you. She won't even think of it. I've no doubt but what Rawlings left her warm enough in the pocket, and a woman like that doesn't need a protector, or yet a husband either. Now if you'll excuse me, I will return to my chamber."

And she walked past him.

Sebastian spun on his heel and walked over to the other side of the room. He looked down at his clenched fist, pulling it back on the point of putting it through the window. His mother had said no more than Esme herself had done, although she had never said he wasn't the one to father her child. But she probably thought it. How could a man serve as father to a babe when the whole worldhis mother includedthought he'd killed the child's true father?

Sebastian Bonnington had faced few obstacles in his life. Thanks to his mother, he was both remarkably beautiful for a man and rigidly aware of proprieties. When other men strayed to mistresses and gambling, losing their estates and their minds in dissolute activities, he had watched and not partaken. Before he'd met Esme, in fact, he had never even felt the urge to commit an indecorous act.

He shook his head, staring blindly at the garden. Oh, he loved Esme's delicious curves and her beauty, but it was her eyes that he found irresistible. There was no other woman in the world with eyes at once seductively enchanting and secretly sad. They had taken his head, robbed his heart, and stolen his senses. Something about her made him love her, willy-nilly.

And if to love her and to marry her was indecorous or foolish, he had no choice in the matter. All he had to do was convince her of the same.

Chapter 7

A Saint, a Sinner, and a Goat

Lady Beatrix Lennox was bored. There wasn't a man to flirt with in the entire house. Lord Winnamore was eligible, but he was hopelessly besotted with Arabella. Too old, naturally, although he was curiously attractive in a ponderous kind of way. But Bea would never, ever take a man from her godmother. She wasn't proud of many of her characteristics, but she had always been loyal.

Bea drifted over to the mirror and practiced a seductive pout. She had dressed herself for a walk, but she didn't know why: there was nothing she found more tedious than the countryside. In fact, the very idea of traipsing through a meadow, gazing at cows, filled her with boredom.

Yet here she was, dressed up like a trussed turkey. In fact, distinctly like a turkey, given that she was wearing a walking dress of Austrian green, exuberantly adorned with ribbons. Little bows marched all the way up her bodice, the better to emphasize her bosom (amply padded with cotton). But there was no one in the house to enjoy it.

Except, of course, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy.

Mr. Fairfax-Lacy had one of those lean, well-bred faces that would have looked as attractive in an Elizabethan ruff as it did in fashionable garb. His grandfather probably wore one of those huge collars. Still, Elizabethans in portraits always seemed to have slightly piggish, avaricious eyes, whereas Fairfax-Lacy had

A curt voice made her jump. "Lady Beatrix, your godmother is going to the village for a brief visit. Would you like to join her?"

Talk of the devil. She turned around slowly and gave Mr. Fairfax-Lacy a smouldering look, just for practice. The one that began just at the edge of her eyes and then turned into a promise.

He looked unmoved. Indifferent, as a matter of fact. "Lady Beatrix?"

A pox on his well-bred nature! He really was a Puritan. Or perhaps he was simply too old to play. He had to be forty. Still, the combination of her reputation and personal assets had made Bea widely admired by the male gender, irrespective of age.

She sauntered over to him and put her hand on his arm. His eyes didn't even flicker in the direction of her bosom, something she found quite disappointing, given the amount of cotton she had bundled under her chemise. "I would rather take a walk," she said. He was much better looking than a cow, after all; his presence might make a country stroll palatable.

"It has been raining on and off all day. Perhaps tomorrow would be a more pleasant experience for you."

"Oh, but I love rain!" she said, giving her sweetest smile, the one that always accompanied outrageous fibs.

Sure enough, he responded like a parrot: "In that case, I would be enchanted to accompany you." But was there a trace of irony in that enchanted ? Did the Boring Puritan have a little bit of depth to him after all?

Bea thought about that while the footman fetched her spencer. Luckily her walking costume came with a matching parasol, because the idea of allowing even a drop of rain to disorder her face or hair made her shiver.

It was appalling to see how wet it was outside. Bea could hardly say that she didn't want her little jean half-boots to touch the ground, given as she'd squealed about loving rain. So she picked her way over the cobblestones in front of the house, hanging onto Mr. Fairfax-Lacy's arm so that she didn't topple over and spoil her spencer with rainwater.

At least he seemed to be enjoying himself. She sneaked a look, and he was smiling as they started down a country lanea messy, dirty little

path guaranteed to ruin her boots. Oh well. Bea had had lots of practice saying goodbye to people and things her sisters, her father what was a pair of boots? She let go of Fairfax-Lacy's arm and tramped along on her own. The path was lined with sooty-looking, thorny bushes with nary a flower to be seen.

He wasn't exactly the best conversationalist in the world. In fact, he didn't say a word. Bea had to admit that the landscape was rather pretty, with all those sparkling drops hanging off branches (waiting to destroy one's clothing, but one mustn't be squeamish about it). And the birds were singing, and so forth. She even saw a yellow flower that was rather nice, although mud-splattered.

"Look!" she said, trying to be friendly. "A daffodil."

"Yellow celandine," her companion said curtly.

After that, Bea gave up the effort of conversation and just tramped along. Helene was welcome to the Puritan. In the city there was always someone to look at: an old woman peddling lavender, a dandy wearing three watch fobs, a young buck trying to catch his whip. Bea found the street endlessly amusing.

But here! This lane had only one inhabitant.

"Hello, there," Fairfax-Lacy said, and he had a gentle smile on his face that she'd never seen before. He had nice creases around his eyes when he smiled like that. Of course, it would all be rather more attractive if he weren't scratching a goat.

The man ignored her cotton-enhanced bosom and saved his smiles for a goat! Still, the goat seemed to be the only object of interest, so Bea poked her way across the lane. The animal stuck its wicked-looking face over the gate and rolled an eye in her direction.

"He looks quite satanic," she said. She'd seen that face before, in the grandest ballrooms in London. "Evil, really."

"He's just an old billy goat," Fairfax-Lacy said, scratching the goat under his chin. The goat had a nasty-looking beard, as if it had been partially eaten while he wasn't watching.

"Aren't you worried that you will catch fleas?"

"Not particularly, given that goats don't carry fleas."

Well, that was an exciting exchange. Bea was just standing there, thinking about how hairy the goat's ears were, when the beast suddenly turned its head and clamped its yellowing teeth on the sleeve of her spencer. Luckily it was belled, in the Russian style, and he didn't manage to chomp her arm, although that was undoubtedly his intention.

"Help!" she shrieked, tugging at her spencer. The goat rolled its eyes at her and bared its teeth but didn't let go of her sleeve.

Instead, he began to back up, and a second later Bea found herself plastered against an extremely wet fence, desperately trying to pull her sleeve away from the monster's mouth as it tried to back into the field.

"Do something!" she bellowed at Fairfax-Lacy. She was shocked to see that he was trying to conceal the fact that he was laughing. Quite overcome by laughter, in fact.

"You bloody beast!"

"Me or the animal?"

"Either! Getthisanimalnow!"

"At your service!" He hopped over the fence and approached the billy goat. But for all the fact that Fairfax-Lacy had been on the very best of terms with the animal a moment before, it wasn't very loyal. As soon as Fairfax-Lacy got close, the goat's rear leg shot out, caught him on the hip, and tossed him into a mud puddle.

Bea was trying to get her left arm out of her spencer. It was difficult trying to squirm out of the garment while hanging onto a fencepost. But even with such pressing business at hand, she stopped to have a laugh at Fairfax-Lacy's expense.

He shot her a level look and got up. He was plastered with mud from his shoulders to his knees. Even his hair was flecked with brown.

Bea was laughing so hard that her stomach hurt. "What sort of mud is it?" she called out, breaking into a fresh storm of giggles.

"The kind women slap on their faces to improve their complexions," he growled over his shoulder. "May I bring you a handful?" This time he managed to avoid the goat's kick, but he couldn't get close enough to grab her spencer. Every time he approached the animal, it bared its

ugly yellow teeth and kicked at him again.

Finally Fairfax-Lacy turned back to her. "Take it off."

"What do you think I'm trying to do?" Bea cried, all laughter disappearing from her voice.

"He's eaten the sleeve already."

"Bloody hell!"

"You swear far too much," the Puritan said.

"I swear just as much as I wish to," Bea retorted, starting to unbutton. The goat hadn't given an inch; it just stood there chewing on her sleeve as if he was making a supper of it.

"You're going to have to help me," she finally said sourly. "I can't unbutton the rest without letting go of the fencepost. And if I do that he'll undoubtedly drag me straight over the fence." She eyed Fairfax-Lacy. "Not that I want you anywhere near me. Does that mud smell as potent as it looks?"

"Yes," he said, sauntering over to her.

He was the most infuriating man. This was literally—literally! the first look he'd given her that acknowledged her as a woman. In fact, it was as if he were seeing her for the first time. He didn't look Elizabethan at all. He looked

Bea's stomach took a funny little hop, and she felt a wave of unaccountable shyness. So she kept her eyes down as he unbuttoned the rest of her spencer. It was all very romantic, what with the odoriferousness of his person and the grinding sound of a goat munching her extravagantly expensive garment.

Once it was unbuttoned, she managed to squirm the rest of the way out of her left sleeve, and then quickly shed the right. One could have sworn that the goat had been waiting for that moment. The very second her body was free of the spencer he took a bigger bite and then bared his teeth in a smile.

Bea felt a wave of anger. "Go get him!" she ordered the Puritan.

He laughed. He was still looking at her as if she were a person, rather than an annoying insect, but Bea didn't let that distract her.

"Then I shall do so myself," she said, unlatching the gate and pushing it open. There was a ghastly squishing noise as her boot sank into brown muck. Bea ignored it.

He closed the gate behind her and leaned on it with a huge grin on his face. She thought about sticking her tongue out at him and rethought it. She was twenty-three, after all.

"Goat," she said, in the low, threatening tone she had perfected on her four smaller sisters. "Goat, give me that garment."

The goat stopped chewing for a second and looked at her, and Bea knew she had him.

She walked over, ignoring the Puritan's shouts. Apparently Fairfax-Lacy had realized she was serious and seemed perturbed that she might get injured.

"Don't even think about kicking me," she told the goat. "I'll tie your ears in a bow and you'll look so stupid that no lady goat will ever look at you again."

He stopped chewing. Bea took another step and then held out her hand. "Drop that coat!" she said sharply.

The goat just stared at her, so she used the meanest tone she had, the one she reserved for little sisters who were caught painting their cheeks with her Liquid Bloom of Roses. "Drop it!"

He did, naturally.

Bea cast a triumphant look over her shoulder and bent to pick up her coat. Fairfax-Lacy was tramping across the field after her, no doubt impressed by her magnetic effect on animals.

Time has a way of softening memories. Yes, her meanest tone had been successful. But how could she have forgotten that her wicked little sisters often found retribution?

The kick landed squarely on her bottom and actually picked her off her feet. She landed with a tremendous splash, just at the feet of Mr. Stephen Fairfax-Lacy.

"Ow!"

At least he didn't laugh at her. He squatted next to her, and his blue

eyes were so compassionate that they made her feel a little teary. Or perhaps that was due to the throbbing in her bottom.

"You've still got your spencer," he said reassuringly.

Bea looked down at her hand, and sure enough, she was clutching a muddy, chewed-up garment. The goat may have got his revenge, but she'd kept his supper. She started to giggle.

A smile was biting at the corners of the Puritan's mouth too. A splatter of warm rain fell on Bea's cheeks, the kind that falls through sunshine. Water slid behind her ears and pattered on the leaves of a little birch. Bea licked her lips. Then, as suddenly as it started, the shower stopped.

"I didn't realize how much you treasure your clothing," he said, touching her cheek. For a moment Bea didn't know what he was doing, and then she realized he was wiping mud from her face.

Without even thinking, she leaned against the Puritan and just let laughter pour out of her. She howled with laughter, the way she used to, back when she and her sisters would lark around in the nursery. The way she did when the world was bright and fresh and new.

She laughed so hard that she almost cried, so she stopped.

He wasn't laughing with her. Damned if the Puritan didn't have the sweetest eyes in the whole world. He scooped her off the ground and then strode over to the birch and sat down, back against its spindly trunk. Bea found it very interesting that when he sat down he didn't put her on the grass, but on his lap.

"You have triumphed," he told her. Sunlight filtered through the birch leaves in a curiously pale, watery sort of way. It made his eyes look dark blue, an azure bottom-of-the-sea type of blue.

She raised an eyebrow. Actually, now that she thought of it, all the color she'd put into her eyebrows and lashes had probably made its way down her cheek. Oh well, he likely thought it was just mud.

"A goat conqueror."

"One of my many skills," she said, feeling a little uncomfortable.

"I just want to suggest that you rest on your laurels," he said, and his eyes had a touch of amusement that made Bea feel almost almost

weak. She never felt weak. So she leaned against him and thought about how good that felt. Except she wasn't quite following the conversation.

"What do you mean?" she finally asked.

There was a definite current of laughter in his voice. "Your bonnet."

Bea shrieked and clapped a hand to her head, only just realizing that she had felt rain falling on her head as well.

"There." He pointed to the right. The damned goat was chewing up her very best hat. The green plume hung drunkenly from his mouth, and he seemed to be grinning at her.

Bea started up with a shriek of rage.

"I think not!" The Puritan had arms like steel. He didn't pay a bit of attention to her wiggling, just picked her up and turned her around. When she looked up at his face, she suddenly stopped protesting.

He didn't kiss like a Puritan. Or an old man either.

He kissed like a hungry man. Bea's first sensation was triumph. So the Puritan had pretended that he didn't notice her charms. Ha! That was all an act. He was just he was just like but then somehow, insidiously, she lost her train of thought.

He was kissing her so sweetly, as if she were the merest babe in arms. He didn't even seem to wish to push his tongue into her mouth. Instead he rubbed his lips against hers, danced on her mouth, his hands cupping her head so tenderly that she almost shivered. She quite liked this.

Oh, she felt his tongue. It sung on her lips, patient and tasting like raspberries. Without thinking, her own tongue tangled with his for a second. Then she realized what she was doing and clamped her mouth shut. There was nothing she hated more than a man pushing his great tongue where it didn't belong.

But he didn't. His lips drifted across her face and pressed her eyes shut, and then closed back on her lips with a ravenous hunger that made her soften, ache deep inside.

He probably thinks I'm a virgin, Bea thought in a foggy sort of way.

His mouth was leaving little trails of fire. He was nibbling her ear, and she was tingling all over. In fact, she wantedshe wanted him to try again. Come back, she coaxed silently, turning her face toward his lips. Try to kiss me, really kiss me. But he didn't. Instead, his tongue curled around the delicate whorls of her ear, and Bea made a hoarse sound in her throat. He answered it by nipping her earlobe, which sent another twinge deep between her legs.

He tugged her hair and she obediently tipped her face back, eyes closed, and allowed him to taste her throat, all the time begging silently that he return, return, kiss her again. But he seemed to be feasting on her throat. She opened her mouth to say something, but at that moment he apparently decided he had tormented her enough, and his mouth closed over hers.

She could no more fight that masculine strength than she could rise to her feet. He didn't coax this time; he took, and she gave. And it wasn't like all the other times, when she'd tolerated a moment or two of this kind of kissing. The Puritan's kiss was dark and sweet and savage all at once. It sent quivers through her legs and made her strain to be closer. His hands moved down her back, assured, possessive. In a moment he would bring them around to her front, and her breasts were aching for

That was the thought that woke Bea. She hadn't been thinking of grappling in the field when she'd dressed in the morning. These particular breasts weren't meant to withstand a man's hand. There was more cotton than flesh. She tore her mouth away, gasping, and stared at him. She didn't even think about giving him a seductive glance. She was too stunned.

"I like you when you're like this," he said, and there was that sweetness to his eyes again. He reached out and rubbed a splatter of mud from her cheek. "You look rain-washed and very young. Also rather startled. It seemed to me that you've been inviting kisses. Was I wrong?"

"No," she said, trying hard to think what to say next. All her practiced seductive lines seemed to have fled from her head.

"Alas," he said, even more gently, tucking her hair behind her ear. "I can hardly offer marriage to a woman half my age. So I'm afraid that I shall have to leave your kisses, sweet though they are, to some younger man."

Bea's mouth almost fell open. Marriage? Didn't he know who she was? "I don't want" she began, but her voice was hoarse. She stopped. "As it happens, I am not interested in marriage either," she said quite sedately. "I find that I am, however, very interested in you !" She twisted forward and kissed his lips, a promise of pleasure. And she was absolutely honest about that. With him, there would be no boundaries.

But it was he who pulled back. She had been so sure he would lunge at her that she'd smiled but the smile faded.

He was a Puritan. His eyes had gone cold, dark, condemning. "I thought you played the lusty trollop for fun."

She raised her chin. "Actually, no," she said, and she was very pleased to find her tone utterly calm and with just a hint of sarcasm. "I play myself."

"Yourself? Do you even know who you are, under all that face paint?"

"I assure you that I do."

"You play a part you needn't," he said, eyes fixed on hers. "You are young and beautiful, Beatrix. You should marry and have children."

"I think not."

"Why?"

"You simply want to make me like everyone else," she said sharply. "I like wearing macquillage . I would rather not look like myself , as you put it. And I find it incalculably difficult to imagine myself sitting by the fire wearing a lace cap and chattering about my brood of children."

"I think yourself is beautiful. All your paints have washed away at the moment. You never needed them."

"I didn't say I needed them. I enjoy them," she retorted, and then added, deliberately, "just as I occasionally enjoy the company of a man in my bedchamber."

For a moment they just looked at each other, Puritan to trollop. "Am I to understand that you are not interested in taking a mistress?" she asked, meeting his eyes. She was no child to be whipped by his condemnation.

"Actually, I am," he said. "But I have little interest in one so practiced."

Bea got to her feet, shaking out her skirts. Then she bent over and picked up her mangled spencer, shaking it out and folding it over her arm, taking a moment to make absolutely certain that her face wouldn't reveal even for a second what she felt.

"I have often noticed that men of your years seem to overprize naivete," she replied calmly.

He showed no reaction, but her quip was so untrue that she gained no joy from saying it. He wasn't old. Suddenly, she decided to be honest. Looking him in the eye, she said, "That was cruel, and quite shabby, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy. I would not have expected it of you."

"I'm sorry."

She nodded and began to turn toward the gate. After all, she'd had much worse things said to her, mostly by women, but then there was her dear father. So when he caught her arm, she turned toward him with a little smile that was almost genuine.

"Don't you think we should take our bedraggled selves home?"

There was real anguish in his eyes. "I feel like the worst sort of bastard. Kissing you in a field and then insulting you."

At that, she grinned. "I gather you wish I were an innocent, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy. But I am not. I truly enjoyed that kiss." The smile she gave him was as wicked and lazy as any she'd ever bestowed on a man. "And I would very much have enjoyed your company in my bedchamber as well. But I have never forced myself on a man. I fully understand that you are looking for a far more respectable mistress." Helene was an altogether perfect alternative.

At that moment, Bea made up her mind. Helene would never be able to lure the Puritan on her own. She, Beatrix, would have to help, if only to prove that she didn't hold grudges, even when rejected. She would give him to Helene as a present.

She turned and made her way across the field, and when the goat rolled his wicked eyes and snapped his lips over a Pomona green satin ribbon, all that remained of her bonnet, she just smiled at him.

Which startled the animal so much that he galloped off to the other end of the field, leaving her hat behind.

Chapter 8

The Sewing Circle

Esme's great relief, Mrs. Cable swept into her morning parlor on the very stroke of ten o'clock. Esme had been putting crooked stitches into a sheet for at least five, perhaps even ten, minutes and hadn't got further than two hands' lengths. She hastily bundled the sheet to the side to greet her guest.

"My goodness, Lady Rawlings!" Mrs. Cable said. "How very becoming that cap looks on you! You are verily an illustration of the good book of Timothy, which says that women should adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety rather than gold and pearls."

Esme touched her head self-consciously. It was the very first time that she had ever worn a cap, and she felt like a fool. Like one of those Renaissance fools, with bells hanging off their caps. It felt like rank hypocrisy, as if wearing a trifling bit of lace on top of one's head would make up for the fact that two days ago she'd reveled in indecencies with her gardener. One could only imagine what would happen if her guest knew the truth!

Esme pushed away that thought and offered Mrs. Cable some tea.

"I would be grateful," Mrs. Cable said, plumping herself onto the settee next to Esme, and showing no inclination whatsoever to pick up an unhemmed piece of cotton. "For a body must have sustenance, and that's a fact!"

"I quite agree," Esme said, pouring tea into a cup and ruthlessly repressing visions of other kinds of bodily sustenance, types of which she doubted Mrs. Cable would approve quite so heartily.

Mrs. Cable sipped and raised her eyebrows. "She is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar."

Esme was not someone with a facility in biblical verses. Oddly enough, contact with Mrs. Cable seemed to be increasing her irritation rather than her piety. "Indeed?"

"Proverbs," Mrs. Cable said briskly. "This is India tea, is it not? An expense, a dear expense, but quite delicious. I have brought with me six sheets, which I managed to hem in my spare time this week."

"How marvelously industrious you are!" Esme gushed. She herself couldn't seem to sew anything except under the direct supervision of the Circle itself, so she never participated in the weekly count of completed sheets.

"You must have a great deal of time on your hands these days, Lady Rawlings."

Esme resisted the temptation to tell Mrs. Cable that having a houseful of dissolute guests made for rather a lot of work. "So one would think."

Luckily Slope opened the door. "Lady Winifred," he announced, "and Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq."

"What a pleasure to see you, Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq."

Esme exclaimed. "And here we thought you were enjoying yourself in London and we wouldn't see you until the season ended!"

"We are all assembled," Mrs. Cable put in, "as when the good book says that the elders were assembled."

"I'd take it as a personal compliment if you'd not refer to me as an elder, Mrs. Cable," Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq snapped. "Lucy and I have fled London for a week or so. The poor girl is quite, quite worn out by all the festivities. As am I," she added, looking remarkably robust. "Sponsoring a debut is a quite exhausting business." Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq's sister had recently died, leaving her to administer her niece's debut.

"And by all accounts, Lucy is having a particularly exciting time," Lady Winifred said with a good-natured chuckle. Lady Winifred had three grown daughters living in London; while she no longer traveled to the city for the season, she seemed to know of even the tiniest event.

Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq leveled a glare at Lady Winifred, who was demurely threading a needle. "I expect that, as always, accounts of the incident have been grossly exaggerated."

Mrs. Cable's eyes were bulging out with pure excitement. "Never tell me that something happened to sweet Miss Aiken! Your niece could not create a scandal. There must be some mistake!"

Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq's mouth twisted. She was a rather corpulent woman, whose body seemed to have focused itself in her bosom; it jutted below her chin like the white cliffs of Dover. Generally, she had an air of victory, but today she looked rather deflated.

Esme put down her sheet. "What on earth has happened to Miss Aiken?" she asked. Lucy Aiken had always seemed a pallidly unimaginative girl and certainly not one to achieve notoriety.

"It's her father's blood coming out," Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq said heavily.

Mrs. Cable gasped. "Never say so!"

"I do say so! If my sister hadn't married beneath her, none of this would have happened!"

"It didn't sound particularly outrageous to me," Lady Winifred observed, turning the corner on her hem. "After all, many girls do foolish things in their first season. It's almost expected. And it's not as if she created some sort of true scandal!"

Aha, Esme thought to herself. That would have been my role in the old days. She was astounded that neither Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq nor Lady Winifred had mentioned her cap. Did they really think she was old enough, stodgy enough, widowed enough, to wear one of these? Even Arabella didn't wear a cap!

"My niece insulted the great Brummell himself," Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq said heavily.

"What on earth did Miss Aiken say to him?" Esme asked, fascinated despite herself. She'd often wanted to insult Brummell.

"He did her the inestimable honor of complimenting her complexion, and then asked what preparation she used on her freckles." Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq shuddered. "Lucy was rather tired, and apparently she did not entirely understand the breadth of Mr. Brummell's importance in the ton. Or so she tells me."

"And?" Mrs. Cable said.

"She snapped at the man," Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq admitted. "She informed him that any preparations she chose to use on her complexion were her business, and no one else's."

"The snare of vanity," Mrs. Cable said darkly.

"The vanity is all Mr. Brummell's," Esme pointed out. "The man takes a spiteful delight in pointing out the faults that one most wants to hide."

"She loathes her freckles," Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq said. "I blame them on her father's side of the family. We have nothing of the sort in our family, and so I have told Lucy, time out of mind."

"Vanity," Mrs. Cable put in.

Everyone ignored her. "You were right to bring poor Lucy to the country for a week," Lady Winifred said. "Everyone will have forgotten by next Monday."

"True enough. More importantly, has she met any gentlemen whom she finds acceptable?" Esme put in.

Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq looked slightly more cheerful. "Several gentlemen have paid her marked attention. I am hopeful that they will overlook both her slip of the tongue and the freckles."

"Poor Lucy just didn't understand that we fairly beg Mr. Brummell to be discourteous to us," Esme said. "He's a horrid little beast, and so I shall tell Lucy when I see her."

"Lady Rawlings!" Mrs. Cable said with a gasp. "Mr. Brummell is a leader of the ton ! It would never do for Miss Aiken to insult him yet again."

Esme bit her lip before she retorted that she too was a leader of the ton , and knew better than Mrs. Cable what a song and dance one was supposed to make before the great Brummell. Or the penniless Brummell, as was rumored.

At that moment the door opened, and Arabella swept in. "Ah, this must be my niece's group of virtuous laborers," she said, laughing. "I thought I'd join you and bring a little frivolity to lighten your exertions!"

"How kind of you," Esme said, giving Arabella a pointed look. If she undermined Esme's new respectability, Esme would have to flay her, relative or no. She had sewn too many sheets to give up her place in the Circle now. "Ladies, may I present my aunt, the Dowager Viscountess Withers? Aunt, this is Mrs. Cable, Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq, and"

"Winifred!" Arabella crowed. "How are you, dear girl?"

Esme watched, rather stupefied, as Lady Winifred came to her feet with a great creaking of stays and Arabella bounded into her embrace. Lady Winifred was a florid woman with a bewildering range of acquaintances. Still, Esme wouldn't have put her aunt among them, given that Lady Winifred spent a great deal of her time impugning the reputations of women with far fewer sins than had Arabella. Perhaps Lady Winifred was losing her memory.

"I haven't seen you in an age!" Lady Winifred boomed. "It's all my fault, of course. I've grown as large as a horse, and as lazy as one too. Nowadays I loathe London."

"I know just what you mean," Arabella said, patting her hand. "There are days when I feel every bone in my aged body and I can't think of a single activity that might please me."

Esme just stopped herself from rolling her eyes. Arabella was wearing an utterly charming and provocative morning gown made of a cotton so light it floated on the breeze. If she didn't look precisely youthful, she did appear to have a good twenty years before she'd feel even a touch of rheumatism.

The look on Mrs. Cable's face made it clear that she, at least, was having no trouble remembering the kind of activities for which Arabella was famed. "How unusual to find such a distinguished personage in Limpley-Stoke," she said with a titter. "I'm afraid that you'll find our little village quite drab!"

Esme suddenly saw Mrs. Cable through her aunt's eyes. Mrs. Cable's small, dark eyes were glistening with dislike. Her mouth was thinned with contempt. The worst thing of all, from Arabella's point of view, would be the fact that Mrs. Cable was wearing a dress of pomona green poplin, just the color to emphasize the sallow color of her cheeks.

"No place that contained my niece could be tedious!" Arabella replied, whisking herself into a chair. "I do believe I would even travel to America to see her. And that's a profound compliment, as I'm sure you all know how sea air can ruin one's complexion."

"I am honored," Esme said, pouring Arabella a cup of tea. "Thank goodness you needn't go to such lengths, dear aunt. At your age," she added.

Arabella narrowed her eyes at her. "I see you've taken up wearing a cap, dearest niece. At your age."

Lady Winifred had settled herself back with a length of cotton. "I won't offer you a piece of this, Arabella," she said with a booming laugh. "I don't think of you as a needle-mistress!"

"But of course, you're right," Arabella agreed. "I can't sew to save my life."

"Sometimes these sheets are all that come between the poor and the cold floor," Mrs. Cable said pointedly. "Whoso stoppeth his ear at the cry of the poor, she also shall cry herself and not be heard."

Rag-mannered, Esme thought to herself. Could Miles truly have wished her to spend time with the likes of Mrs. Cable?

Apparently Lady Winifred agreed with Esme's assessment. "I have been meaning to mention to you, Mrs. Cable, that there is something just slightly vulgar about quoting the Bible, unless, of course, it is the vicar himself who ventures to recite."

Mrs. Cable thrust back her head, rather like a rooster preparing to battle an impudent hen, and said, "I fear not, but testify unto every man."

Arabella raised one eyebrow and said pleasantly, "My goodness, you do seem to have the Bible at your fingertips. I do congratulate you. It is such an unusual skill to find among the gently bred."

Mrs. Cable turned a deepish puce color. Arabella turned to Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq with her charming smile. "I don't believe we've met. But as it happens, I did meet your delightful ward, Miss Aiken, just two weeks ago, at Almack's. Sally Jersey introduced me. We both thought her manners were remarkably engaging, with very little of that strident awkwardness that seems rampant this season, and I certainly applauded Sally's decision to give her a voucher to Almack's."

Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq had silently watched the skirmish between Arabella and Mrs. Cable to this point, but she was instantly wooed and won.

"That is tremendously kind of you, Lady Withers," she said, putting her sewing to the side, "and I must ask you a question. I have been longing to know the truth behind the Countess of Castignan's extraordinary marriage, and I expect you know all about it."

Arabella laughed. "Well, as to that, Petronella is one of my dearest friends"

Esme risked a look at Mrs. Cable. She was sitting like a dour crow, stitching so quickly that her needle was a blur. Even for the sake of Miles, her departed if not terribly dear husband, could she contemplate a lifetime in Mrs. Cable's company?

Chapter 9

Prudishness That Coveted Quality

Bea woke in the morning feeling rather ashamed of herself. Of course, there was nothing new in that sensation. Her father had often bellowed his amazement that he'd never managed to teach her a single thing, but she secretly thought he had had no difficulty imparting shame. She'd simply refused to reveal it, to his everlasting fury.

But she should never have kissed Stephen Fairfax-Lacy in the goat pasture. Never. He was singled out for Helene, and if there was one thing that Bea did not do, it was steal men from other women.

I'll dress in such a way as to make it absolutely clear to Mr. Puritan that he's not to kiss me again, Bea thought. Then she remembered that the Puritan didn't want to kiss her, now he knew of her experience. If that pang in the region of her stomach was shame, Bea refused to acknowledge it.

"I'll wear the new morning gown," she told her maid, Sylvie. "The one with blonde lace."

"But, my lady, I thought you had decided that gown was entirely too prudish," Sylvie lisped in her French accent.

"It is rather prudish, isn't it? Wonderful. I'm in a Puritanical mood."

"If you say so," Sylvie said resignedly. She was rather hoping that her mistress had taken a permanent dislike to the gown and would hand it on to her.

Sometime later Bea looked at herself in the glass with some satisfaction. She looked as her grandmother might have said as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. The dress was made of the finest jaconet muslin in a pale amber, trimmed with deep layers of pointed blonde

lace. It had long sleeves, and while the bodice clung to every inch of her bosom (and several inches that weren't hers at all), it was so high-necked that it practically touched her ears.

"No Spanish papers," Sylvie suggested, as Bea sat herself at the dressing table. Once she'd gotten over the disappointment of having her mistress actually wear the coveted gown, she'd started enjoying the dressing, as always. Truly, she was lucky. Her mistress was lovely, invariably cheerful, and, most importantly, took clothing very, very seriously.

"You're absolutely right," Bea said, nodding at her in the mirror. "The papers are far too red. My cheeks should be just the palest pink. Didn't I buy something called Maiden's Blush at that shop in Bedford Square?"

Sylvie was rummaging through a smallish trunk that stood open to the right of Bea's dressing table. "Here it is!" she said, holding up a small bottle. "Although you may wish to consider the Royal Tincture of Peach," she added, handing over another bottle as well.

Bea tipped both colors onto a bit of cotton and considered them carefully. "Maiden's Blush, I think," she decided. "The Peach is lovely, though. Perhaps I'll use it on my lips."

"Don't you think it will be rather pale?" Sylvie asked doubtfully.

"No, no," Bea said, deftly applying a translucent layer of rouge. "I'm nothing more than a seedling today. Utterly missish." She ignored the little voice in the back of her mind that kept insisting on the contradictory nature of her actions. Why shouldn't such an experienced trollop as herself dress any way that she pleased? Illogical or no.

"Ahh," Sylvie said. She loved a challenge. "In that case, I shall change your hair, my lady. Perhaps if I twisted a simple bandeau through it? These beads are entirely too knowing."

"You are a blessing," Bea told her with satisfaction. "What on earth would I do without you?" A few moments later, she grinned at herself in the mirror. Her hair had the simplicity of a fourteen-year-old. She looked utterly milk-and-water. A mere infant!

She refused to think about the perverse impulse that was driving her to demonstrate to Stephen Fairfax-Lacy that she was not as experienced aswell, as she was. For a moment she almost deflated.

Why on earth was she pretending to a virtue she didn't possess and had never before aspired to, either?

There was a knock on the door, and Sylvie trotted away. Bea delicately applied kohl to her lashes. Not even for the sake of innocence would she emerge from her room without coloring her lashes.

"May Lady Rawlings visit for a moment?" Sylvie called from the door.

Bea hopped up, slipping her feet into delicate white kid slippers. "Esme! Do come in, please!"

Sylvie opened the door, but Esme just stood there for a moment, blinking. "Bea?" she said weakly, "is that you?"

"Do you like it?" Bea said, laughing.

Esme dropped her considerable girth into a chair by the fireplace. "You look like a green girl, which I gather must be your aspiration."

"Precisely," Bea replied triumphantly.

"I do like the color you're wearing on your lips, although I could never wear something so pale myself. Where did you buy it?"

"It was the perfumer on St. James Street, wasn't it, Sylvie?" Bea said.

"Indeed it was, my lady," Sylvie replied.

"I haven't been to London in over six months," Esme said, wiggling her toes in front of the fire. "I hardly remember what the inside of a perfumer looks like!"

"How appalling," Bea said, tucking herself into the chair opposite. "I suppose that carrying a child does limit one's activities." She felt very pleased at the idea that she herself would never be banned from London for that many months. Being unmarried had definite advantages.

"Actually, it's this respectability business," Esme answered.

"Lady Godwin did mention that you are" Bea stopped, unable to find a tactful way to phrase Esme's ambitions.

"Aspiring to be above reproach," Esme said.

"We all aspire to something, I suppose," Bea said, rather doubtfully.

"Did you buy those slippers from Mrs. Bell?" Esme inquired. "I adore the daisy clocks on the ankle."

"Mrs. Bell tried to convince me to buy a shawl with the same daisy pattern. But I thought that might be too kittenish."

"You're risking kittenish now, if you don't mind my saying so, but you somehow manage to look delightful instead. At any rate," Esme said with a sigh, "I came to warn you that although my Sewing Circle has finally departed, I was maneuvered into asking them to return for a late luncheon. So please, feel free to eat in your chambers unless you wish to be showered in Bible verses."

"Sewing Circle?" Bea repeated rather blankly.

"Did Arabella forget to tell you?" Esme said, standing up and shaking out her skirts. "I've joined a local Sewing Circle. We meet every week, at my house, due to my delicate condition. Arabella joined us this morning, which caused great excitement and led to the luncheon invitation."

"Never tell me that Arabella is able to sew!" Bea said with fascination.

"Absolutely not. But her tales of the Countess of Castignan certainly kept everyone awake. The problem is that the most repellent of the seamstresses, Mrs. Cable, and my aunt have taken a fervent dislike to each other. So there is more than a slim possibility that lunch will be a demonstration of gently bred fury."

Esme paused at the door. "I have been trying to come up with a seating arrangement that will keep my aunt and Mrs. Cable apart, and I have decided to scatter small tables in the Rose Salon." She gave Bea an alluring smile. "If you feel sufficiently brave, I would love to put you at a table with Mrs. Cable. She has a marked tendency to punctuate her conversation with ill-chosen Bible verses. Given your current appearance, she will deem you among the saved and be cordial."

Bea managed to simper. "Actually, I am quite well versed in the Bible myself."

"Oh goodness, how wonderful! I shall seat you just beside Mrs. Cable, if you don't mind. You can quote at each other in perfect bliss."

"Mr. Fairfax-Lacy seems quite sanctimonious," Bea put in before she could stop herself. "Mrs. Cable would likely approve of him. All those good works."

"Do you think so?" Esme asked with some doubt. "I believe that the man is undergoing some sort of internal upset. He doesn't appear to be interested in Parliamentary doings at all. And that is his reputation, you know."

"All work and no play?"

"Precisely." Bea thought about Stephen's activities in the goat pasture and rather agreed with Esme. The man was not thinking about Parliament. No: he was on the hunt for a mistress. Or perhaps a wife.

"But he must be accustomed to tedious speeches, so I shall put him at your table," Esme continued. "Helene can sit there as well and rehearse dallying with Mr. Fairfax-Lacy. You must prompt her if she neglects her practice. Although I must tell you, Bea, it's my opinion that your poetry will have to do the trick if Helene and Fairfax-Lacy are to become intimate. I've known Helene for years, and it simply isn't in her nature to play the coquette."

"But she did elope," Bea said, wondering how on earth that had happened. Who would elope with a woman who had all the sensual appeal of a matron of sixty? Yet when Helene laughed, she was surprisingly captivating.

Esme shrugged and opened the door. "Her husband, Rees, effected that miracle somehow, and they've both spent the last ten years regretting it. I do believe the marriage ended before they even returned from Gretna Green, although they resided together for quite some time.

"I am counting on your bravery at luncheon, then." She paused for a moment and looked at Bea. "Amazing! I would hardly have recognized you. I suppose you are revisiting the artless Lady Beatrix Lennox of age sixteen or thereabouts."

Bea gave her a rather crooked smile. "I hate to disillusion you, Esme, but I was fourteen when my father discovered that I was coloring my lashes with burnt cork. He never recovered from that initial shock."

"Oh, parents!" Esme said, laughing. "You should hear my mother on the subject of my innocence! Or the lack thereof. According to my mother, I sprang from the womb a fully fledged coquetteshaped in my aunt's image, as it were."

Bea grinned. "You could do worse."

"Much," Esme said with an answering grin. "At luncheon, then!"

When Bea slipped into a chair next to the redoubtable Mrs. Cable, her mind was not on the meal. She was wondering precisely how a Puritan gentleman greets a woman he vigorously kissed in the goat pasture the previous afternoon. Would Stephen pretend that they had never grappled with each other? That his tongue hadn't slipped between her lips? That she hadn't

Bea could feel that rare thing, a real flush, rising in her cheeks, so she hurriedly pushed the memory away. She hadn't spent a good twenty minutes painting herself with sheer layers of Maiden's Blush only to find herself blushing.

The gentleman in question was rather exquisitely dressed himself, if the truth be told. Bea watched under her lashes as he strode into the room. He was wearing a costume of the palest fawn, with a severely cut-away jacket. For a man who spent his time roaming about the House of Commons, he seemed to have unaccountably powerful thighs.

"Oh Lord, there he is," Helene moaned, sitting down next to her. "This is such a foolish idea."

"You've no reason to worry," Bea said to her encouragingly. "The poem can do the work for you."

"Countess Godwin," Mrs. Cable announced, snapping her napkin into her lap, "we have met, although I expect you have no memory of the event."

"I remember perfectly," Helene said. "And how pleasant to see you again."

"It was a dinner that Lady Rawlings gave some few months ago," Mrs. Cable told Bea.

"How lovely that must have been!" Bea said breathlessly. She was rather enjoying playing the role of a virtuous maiden. It was a new experience, after all, since she'd spent her youth trying to infuriate her father with less-than-virtuous antics.

"It was not lovely," Mrs. Cable said darkly, "not at all. Countess

Godwin, I daresay you have formed the same aversion as I to even thinking of the occasion. Quite scandalous."

Bea clasped her hands and widened her eyes. Stephen was on his way to their table, and she wanted him to see her in the midst of full-blown girlishness. "Oh, what could have happened!" she cried, just as Stephen arrived.

Helene, who had just noticed Bea's transformation, gave her a sardonic look. "Nothing you couldn't have topped, Bea."

The Puritan created a diversion by bowing and introducing himself to Mrs. Cable, who seemed enraptured at the idea of sharing a table with a Member of Parliament.

Somewhat to Bea's disappointment, he didn't even blink when she gave him a girlish smile and a giggle. Instead he bowed just as one would to a damsel still in the schoolroom, then turned readily to Countess Godwin and kissed her hand.

"Earl Godwin was there, of course," Mrs. Cable said in her sharp voice, returning directly to the subject. "Mr. Fairfax-Lacy, we are discussing an unfortunate dinner that I and Countess Godwin attended in this very room, some months ago. I won't go into the details in present company." She cast a motherly look at Bea, who bit her lip before she could grin, and then looked modestly at her hands.

Stephen caught a glimpse of Bea's downcast eyes and felt like bellowing with laughter. She was a minx. It wasn't only that she was dressed as primly as an escapee from a nunnery. Somehow she had managed to make her whole face look as guileless as a babe in arms. Gone was the mischievous twinkle and the lustful glances. She had the aura and the innocence of a saint, and only that one dimple in her cheek betrayed the fact that she was enjoying herself mightily. Other than that dimple, she was the picture of a naive duke's daughter. If there was such a thing in England.

"I daresay your husband told you," Mrs. Cable was saying to Lady Godwin, "that he and I exchanged some pointed words on the subject of matrimony. Not harsh, not at all. But I think I made my point." She smiled triumphantly.

Helene smiled weakly and took a sip of wine. "It would appear to have slipped Rees's mind."

Bea felt a surge of admiration. She herself would likely have lost her

temper by now and started screeching at that harpy.

Mrs. Cable shook her head. "A man shall leave his father and mother, and cleave unto his wife, and so it says in the Bible."

"Alas, Rees is notorious for his defiance of authority," Helene replied.

Bea watched Helene trying to defend herself and felt a surge of fury. Who was this old harridan, and what right had she to say such an unaccountably insulting thing to Helene?

Mrs. Cable looked at Stephen. "I'm certain you won't mind if I act as if we are all old friends," she informed him. "I have given much thought to Lady Godwin's situation in the ensuing months since I dined with her husband." She paused for a drink of water.

Bea saw that Helene's slender hand was clenched so tightly on her napkin that her knuckles were white. "Were you not quoting Genesis just now, Mrs. Cable?" Bea cooed.

Mrs. Cable gave her the approving look of a headmistress with a promising student. "Precisely, Lady Beatrix. It's a true pleasure to meet a young lady with a proper education. Now, Lady Godwin, if I might offer a few"

"My father puts great faith in religious instruction," Bea interrupted.

"Quite right," Mrs. Cable rejoined. "Now I think that I can bring some wisdom to bear on the situation." And she turned back to Helene.

That old snake can see that Helene is defenseless, Bea thought in a fury. "Why, when I fell in love with one of my father's footmen," she said in a high, ringing voice, "my father made me memorize the entire Book of Maccabees in punishment."

"Indeed," Mrs. Cable said, obviously taken aback at this information.

"Yes," Bea said, favoring her with a dulcet smile, "I offered myself to the footman in question, you see, and my father truly did think that I should not have done so."

Mrs. Cable's eyes widened.

"But I don't agree," Bea continued blithely. "Because, of course, the Gospel of John counsels us to love one another. That's chapter thirteen," she told Mrs. Cable. "But I expect you know that." Stephen

was shaking with suppressed laughter. Helene's hand had relaxed, and she was biting back a smile as well.

"Yes, I"

"Even if my love was unconventional," Bea said with a soulful tremor in her voice, "I'm quite certain that it was ripe with virtue."

"Ripe would be the word," Stephen said dryly.

Bea ignored him. "After all, while it is true that a footman would have had difficulty supporting me as a wife"—she glanced modestly at her gown, which cost more than a footman earned in six months—"Proverbs does say that where love is, a dinner of herbs is better than a stalled ox. Although I always wondered what a 'stalled ox' is? Mr. Fairfax-Lacy, perhaps you have come across the term in your many years in Parliament?"

Alas, Stephen didn't have a chance to deliver his opinion because Mrs. Cable sputtered into life again, like a candle that found itself briefly in the path of a rainshower. Now she was viewing Bea with the acute horror of someone who has discovered that an exquisite pastry is rotten in the center.

"Lady Beatrix," she said on an indrawn breath, "I am quite certain that you do not realize the impression your little story might create on the assembled company." She swept a glance around the table.

Helene met her eyes blandly. "Lady Beatrix never fails to surprise me, for one," she said. "A footman, did you say, Bea? How very adventuresome of you!"

"I don't know that I agree," Stephen drawled. He felt a thrill of danger when Bea's eyes met his, especially since the thrill went right between his legs. She was a glorious, impudent piece of womanhood, and he liked her defense of Lady Godwin. If only she knew, she had utterly ceased to look sixteen years old. Her face was too alive for all this nonsense she affected. "I, for one, would like to know how the footman answered Lady Beatrix's overtures," he put in. "Didn't you notice, Mrs. Cable, that while Lady Beatrix apparently offered herself to the footman, she said nothing of his response. Can it be that the man in question refused her?"

Mrs. Cable huffed. "I cannot fathom why we would even discuss such a repellent subject! Surely Lady Beatrix is merely seeking to shock us, for"

"Not at all," Bea said. "I would never do that, Mrs. Cable!"

Mrs. Cable narrowed her eyes. "And where is your father, my lady?"

"At his house," Bea replied, suddenly reverting to her maidenlike docility. "I'm a sad disappointment to him, Mrs. Cable. In fact I make my home with Lady Withers now."

Mrs. Cable huffed. "And the footman"

"Oh, it wasn't due to the footman," Bea said blithely. "Father moved the footman to a house in the country. It was"

"I'll not listen!" Mrs. Cable said shrilly. "You're making a May game of me, my lady, and it's not kind of you. I could take one look at you and know that you aren't one of those scandalous women you're pretending to be."

Helene threw Bea a warning look and put a gentle hand on Mrs. Cable's wrist. "You're absolutely right, of course," she said. "I do keep begging Lady Beatrix to be less frivolous, but I'm afraid that she's quite a romp. But, naturally, it's all in fun, Mrs. Cable."

"I knew that," Mrs. Cable said, blinking rapidly. "I'm a fair judge of character, to which Mr. Cable agrees. Now Lady Beatrix, you may attempt to shock us, but your true purity of character shines through. It's written all over your face. What did you say that was?" she asked the footman. "A regalia of cowcubers? Indeed, I'll try some."

Stephen looked at Bea for a moment, and she had no trouble deciphering his thoughts. He was thinking of the goat pasture, and the true purity of her character.

Chapter 10

The Heights of Pleasure

By the time that Esme finished luncheon, she was resigned to the fact that the house was gradually filling with her aunt's friends, not one of whom was precisely respectable. Her Sewing Circle was doubtless scandalized by her guests, since the said guests substituted cynical wit for gentility. And since they delighted above all in displaying that wit, the house rang with laughter.

Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that the house simply rang with noise. Lady Arabella had taken charge of the housekeeping from top to bottom and seemed to be bent on proving her mothering ability by cleaning from the attics to the cellars. Mind you, it wasn't as if she touched dirt herself.

"I've instructed the maids that we want this house to shine from top to bottom," she announced to Esme. "This is what a mother would do. Remove all worries! You have enough to think about. When will that child come?"

Never mind the fact that Esme had no interest in the attics at all. She was hardly the matronly sort, even in her current respectability. But Arabella didn't stop with the attics. "And I've sent men up on the roof to fix the slate. I've no tolerance for gardeners simply sitting about, and there's nothing to be done outside at any rate." March rain was taking fitful turns with sunshine.

Esme had been listening rather absentmindedly, but she snapped awake at that one. "You sent the gardeners up on the roof?"

Arabella blinked at her. "Haven't you heard the hammering? They started first thing this morning. I noticed that the slate had practically evaporated from your roof in several parts. Without repair, we shall have leaks in short order. No doubt the task will take a few weeks or perhaps a month. But it needs doing."

"It's not safe!" Esme said. Panic surged into her stomach, and she suddenly felt a little dizzy.

"Of course it's safe," Arabella said. "They won't drop slate off the roof. Most of the work's being done in the back of the house. But perhaps I'll station a footman at the front door so he can check that the coast is clear before anyone leaves the house. In fact, darling, that is an excellent idea. We have far too many footmen as it is. I seem to have overestimated the difficulty of hiring staff in the country."

"It's not safe for the gardeners," Esme said, trying to calm her racing heart. Sebastian was up there. Up on a slippery roof, likely on the verge of falling to his death. She could not bear it if that happened. Notnot after Miles.

"Gardeners? Gardeners? They're likely ecstatic to be up in the air," Arabella said, waving her beringed hands. "Much more engaging than digging up weeds, believe me."

She left before Esme could say another word. Perhaps she should tell Arabella the truth about Sebastian. There was probably no one in the world who would be more receptive to the idea that Esme had her former lover installed in the bottom of her garden. Panic beat in her throat. Sebastian had to come down from the roof this very moment.

She went downstairs, bundled herself into a mantle, and slipped out the side door. The sound of hammering bounced off the neighboring hills. Starlings were converging on the elms at the side of the house, pirouetting against the grayish sky. Every blade of grass bent with rain. Now and then she heard the echo of male voices, but she walked all the way to the back of the house without seeing a soul.

And then, as she rounded the house to the west, there he was. Sitting with his back to a chimney, eating a hunk of bread as if he hadn't a care in the world. Marquess Bonnington wasn't hanging from the gutter by one fingernail. He wasn't spread-eagled in the rainy grass, face drained of color. He washe was fine !

In fact, Esme could hardly believe that Sebastian was a marquess. Not this great muscled man, wearing a rough white shirt and sleeves rolled up to show great muscled forearms. No gentleman had muscles like that. Nor thighs, either.

She pulled herself together. What was the point of staring at Sebastian like a lovesick cat? The man would probably roll off the roof in a moment. He wasn't trained for this sort of activity.

"You!" she shouted. Her voice evaporated into the air. He tipped his head back against the chimney, turning his face up to the sun. It

turned his neck to honey, kissed his hair with gold that hadn't changed. He was just bigger stronger. There was more of him.

What was he calling himself these days? She couldn't remember. But she could hardly shout "Bonnington!" either. If any of her guests discovered that Marquess Bonnington was snugly living on her estate, they'd dine out on it for days. Her name and her child's name would be mud. The thought gave her backbone.

She picked up a rock and threw it at the roof as hard as she could. It skittered across the sandstone. She tried again and managed to get up to the level of the slate roof, but all the rock did was ping gently and fall to the gutter.

"Drat!" Esme muttered, eyeing the ladders that were braced against the house. Of course she couldn't climb a ladder.

At that moment a voice spoke nearly in her ear. "May I be of service, madam?"

Esme jumped into the air. "Slope!" she gasped.

Her butler bowed. "I noticed your progress from the Rose Salon, my lady, and I ventured forth in the hopes of being of service."

Esme's cheeks burned. What was she to say? What the devil was she doing out here, anyway?

But Slope didn't wait for a reply. "Baring!" he bellowed at the roof. "Her ladyship wishes to speak with you. Be quick, man!"

Baringor Marquess Bonnington, however one wished to think of it, looked down the roof with such a sweet smile that Esme felt her stomach turn over. He pulled on a cap and descended the ladder. Esme watched for a moment as he climbed down, but she found her eyes lingering on muscled thighs, so she turned to Slope.

"I simply wished to ascertain if the gardener" she began.

But Slope raised a finger. "If you and the marquess were to retire to the rose arbor, my lady, you would be less likely to be seen from the house."

And with that astounding statement, he bowed and retreated.

Esme stood staring after him, mouth open. But here was her gardener,

doffing his hat and fingering the brim, for all the world as if he were indeed an outdoorsman, planning to give his account to the lady of the house.

"How dare you climb my roof!" she snapped, turning her back on him and walking toward the rose arbor, which had so many ancient rose trees growing up its latticed sides that it was impossible to see in or out.

"I wish I could take your arm," Sebastian said, his voice so low that she could hardly hear it.

She didn't bother to turn around. It was quite difficult to pick her way down a slope slick with rain. The last thing she wanted to do was slip off her feet; Sebastian would likely strain his back heaving her back up.

"What the devil are you doing up on that roof?" Esme snapped, turning around the moment they entered the arbor.

Sebastian smiled, that easy smile that never failed to make her feel greedy. The very thought made her indignation rise. "You have no right to risk your life on my roof! I want you off my property, Sebastian. Today!"

He strolled toward her. The rain had dampened his shirt and it clung to his shoulders, outlining a swell of muscles.

"What do you have to say to that?" she demanded, feeling her advantage weaken. Damn him for being so beautiful.

"I say," and his voice was as slow and deep as the rest of him, "first I say hello to your babe, here." He walked just before her and cupped his great hand over her belly.

"Hello," he whispered, looking straight into her eyes, not at her stomach. As if he could hear, the child stirred under his hand.

Sebastian laughed. "He must be rather cramped in there these days." He dropped to his knees and cupped her stomach with both hands. "Hello!" he said against the cloth of her gown. "Time to greet the world."

He looked up at Esme, and there was such wild joy in his eyes that she shivered all over. Then he stood up, and his hands slid around her body to her back.

"First I say hello to the babe," he said, and his voice was as slow and wicked as molasses, "and then I saw hello to his mother."

There wasn't even a thought in her head of avoiding that kiss. He bent his head and his hands pulled her against him, lips settling to hers as gently as the kiss of the sun. "Oh God, Esme, I've missed you," he groaned against her lips. And when she opened her mouth to reply, he plundered.

His tongue was rough and warm and God help her a woman with child, a widow, a mature, respectable widow Esme leaned into his kiss and wound her arm around his neck. He tasted like farmer's bread and he smelled like rain. He didn't move his hands. They stayed, huge and powerful, on her back, making her feel as delicate as a bird. He didn't even twitch a finger toward her breasts, and yet they melted toward him and longed, and other parts of her too

That wave of longing brought her hands from his neck to his shoulders. It was more than longing: it was exquisite relief. He was whole. He hadn't fallen from the roof. The very thought brought her a measure of rationality.

"What were you doing up on the roof?" she said, frowning.

He ignored her. His warm, rough tongue plunged into her mouth, stole her words, brought that melting weakness to her knees. Willy-nilly, she curled her fingers into his hair, returned his kiss fiercely, until

"You could have broken your neck!" Her voice sounded weak, a thread away from silence.

"No," he said. His hands were starting to roam now. He cupped her stomach again, kissed her so sweetly that tears came to her eyes. "Hello there," he whispered, "mama-to-be."

He scooped her up without even seeming to notice what an elephant she'd become and sat on the wrought-iron bench, holding her on his lap. She could feel his welcome stiffly, right through her pelisse.

It had never seemed to matter to Sebastian that her breasts were now so large that she couldn't wear the delicate gowns in fashion. His hands ranged, not roughly but possessively, over the front of her gown. It was almost embarrassing. Her nipples were so tender these days that he merely drew a thumb across her gown and a low moan hung in the air between them.

He looked at Esme's eyes then. They had lost all the fierceness. They didn't snap at him like a mother lion. He pulled her head against his shoulder, brushed a silky black curl from her ear and whispered, "What's the most beautiful mother in the world doing out in the rain, then?"

Her head popped off his shoulder before he'd had a chance to kiss her ear. "Rescuing you!" she said, and her eyes were snapping fire again. "What in the bloody hell were you doing up on the roof?"

He couldn't help it; a smile curled the corner of his mouth. She wouldn't be so fierce if she didn't care for him.

"Mending the slate," he said, knowing it would drive her mad. But he liked her furious, those gorgeous eyes blazing at him, breasts heaving, focused on him .

She jerked her head away from him. But she didn't move to stand up, so he kept his hands exactly where they were. One on her narrow back and the other cupping the swell of her breast. His fingers longed to move, to caress, nay to take her breast and

He pulled himself back to a state in which it was possible to listen. She was scolding him for being reckless, heedless, brash, daring, inconsiderate His fingers trembled, and so he allowed himself to take her breast more snugly in his hand. He imagined its glorious weight on his chest.

He was imprudent, unwise and altogether foolish

He was maddened by the desire to push off her pelt, sweep a hand under her gown and claim her as his. Again. Every time. Those few times she had visited his hut, he'd found that his sense of ownership, of a primitive she-is- mine feeling had lasted only an hour or so after she'd left. She'd returned to the house, and he'd stayed in his hut and dreamed of her.

His hand closed on her breast, and his thumb rubbed over her nipple again. The flow of words stopped and there was a tiny gasp. He did it again, and again, and then bent to her mouth. Those lips, so dark, cherry dark, were his. She whimpered and trembled against his chest. He memorized each quiver.

"You are mine , " he said, and the growl of it surprised him.

She leaned back against his shoulder, silky curls falling over his shirt,

her eyes closed. Her breathing grew shallow, and she clutched his shirt as his thumb rubbed again and again with the roughness of desire, with the roughness with which he wanted to plunge between her legs.

But he couldn't. They were in a rose arbor, after all. Slowly he eased her back against his shoulder and let his hand cup her breast, sending a silent apology to the nipple that begged against his palm.

He knew instantly when she returned to herself. It wasn't that she sprang to her feet. It was an imperceptible change in the air, in the very air they were breathing.

"No," she said, and the anguish in her voice struck him in the heart. "I don't want this!"

"I know," he said, as soothingly as he could, tracing with one finger the graceful curve of her neck. "I know you don't."

"Obviously, you don't care for my wishes! Otherwise you would have returned to the Continent by now. What if one of my guests decides to take a breath of fresh air?"

"I do care for your wishes. You wish to be respectable. You wish to remain a widow. You also"he dropped a kiss onto the sweet cream of her neck"you also wish to bed me."

"I can live without the latter."

"I don't know that I can," he said, his mouth glazing her neck. Her perfume was surprisingly innocent for such a worldly lady. She didn't smell like some sort of exotic inhabitant of the East Indies, but like an almond tree in flower.

"I admit that I find you enticing," she said, and he spared a moment to admire the steadiness of her voice. "But the game is over. Slope, my butler, knows who you are. In fact, he must have known from the moment you applied for a position. While he is unlikely to gossip about the matter, it is a matter of time before one of my house guests finds out your identity. The house is full of people who know you, Sebastian. I'll be ruined. And I can't bear that, not when so much is at stake."

"And I don't want you to fall off my roof either!" she said, her hand gripping his shoulder. "I cannot bear it if something happens to you, Sebastian. Not after Miles. Not afterDon't you understand?" Esme felt

as if her breath caught in her chest at even saying it aloud.

Oh, he understood all right. He'd probably have five little marks on his shoulder, one love mark for each of her fingers. The smile that grew on his face came from his heart, and if she didn't recognize that "You want me to leave?" he said, and he had to steady his voice because she might recognize the rough exaltation there.

She nodded fiercely. "No more Baring the Gardener," she said. "You must go."

Much to his regret, he rather agreed with her. It was time to say good-bye to his disguise, much though he loved the simple life. "Do you really, truly wish me to return to the Continentor, to be specific, France?"

She nodded again. But Sebastian noted the way she swallowed, and he had to bite back another growl of triumph.

"If you truly wish me to go," he said into her hair, "you'll have to grant me a wish."

"A wish?"

Another curl of her perfume caught him, and he had to stop himself from licking her face, simply drinking her. She was so beautiful, in all her silken, sulky anger and fear for him. "One wish." His voice sounded drunken.

"I wish for you to go," Esme said primly. "It is certainly"

He cut her off. "One night," he said. "I want one night."

Her backbone straightened. "What?"

"I'll come to you tonight. I'll come to your bedroom," he said into her ear, and his tongue lingered there for a second. "I'll take you in my arms, and put you on the bed"

"You certainly will not!"

He smiled into her curls. "Do you truly wish me to leave your property?"

"Immediately!" she snapped.

"Then I demand compensation." He let his hand spread on her breast

again, warm and possessive on the curve. He felt the quiver that rolled through her body as acutely as she did. "One night," he said hoarsely, and he couldn't keep all the lust and love from tangling together in his voice. "One night and I'll leave your employ and retire as a gardener."

She was silent, likely worrying about whether they'd be discovered, fretting about her respectability. Only he, whose reputation was absolutely ruined, seemed to understand how very little respectability mattered in life.

His hand trailed over the fabric of her dress, touching the roundness of her thigh. "Oh God, Esme, give me this." But she was holding something back. He could tell.

"Are you sure that you would want to make love to me in this state?" Her eyes met his, direct as ever. "I've grown even more ungainly and"

He caught her silliness in his mouth. "I want to devour you." That seemed to silence her; her cheeks turned pink. "In fact, you should take a nap this afternoon, because there won't be much sleep tonight. I mean to have you every way I can. I mean to intoxicate you and torment you so that you know precisely how I feel about you." His finger trailed down her cheek and tipped up her chin.

"Don't mistake what is going to happen tonight." His voice was sinful, dark and hoarse. "You will never forget the imprint of my skin after tonight, Esme. Waste your life chitchatting with ladies in lace caps. Raise your child with the help of your precious Sewing Circle. But in the middle of all those lonely nights, you will never, ever, forget the night that lies ahead of us."

Esme's heart was beating so fast that she could hardly speak.

"Tonight." He held her gaze. "And then I'll leave for France because because that's what you want, true?"

At the moment she couldn't quite remember what it was she wanted. Besides the one thing, of course. That thing was pressing against her backside as they spoke.

And the Sewing Circle. She mustn't forget the Sewing Circle.

Chapter 11

Tonight Helene was going to seduce Stephen Fairfax-Lacy, otherwise known as the Puritan, and Bea was perfectly reconciled to that fact. In fact, she was the instigator. She herself had selected an exquisitely desirous bit of verse for Helene to read. Not only that, but she, Helene and Esme had had an uproarious time trying to teach Helene to use a fan and various other flirtatious tricks.

The only reason I feel a bit disconsolate, Bea thought to herself, is that I have no one to play with. If only Arabella had invited sufficient gentlemen to this house party, she wouldn't have had the slightest qualm while assisting Helene to use the stodgy M.P. in order to curdle her husband's liver. If there was a dog in the manger here, it was Bea herself. Because of course she would never want Mr. Fairfax-Lacy, not really.

I merely feel, Bea instructed herself, a mild anxiety at the upcoming performance of my protegee. For it was her poem Helene was reading and her idea to use Mr. Fairfax-Lacy to make Helene's husband jealous. Thus Helene's success or failure reflected on Bea. And why she didn't just keep her mouth shut when she had the impulse to meddle in the lives of perfect strangers, she didn't know.

Lord Winnamore had elected to be the first to read. He was standing before the fireplace, droning on and on from Virgil's Second Eclogue. Whatever that was. Bea didn't care if it had been translated into English by Shakespeare himself; it was as boring as dirt.

"Well, Winnamore," Arabella said briskly, the very moment he fell silent, "that certainly was educational! You've managed to put my niece to sleep."

Esme sat up with a start, trying hard to look as if she hadn't been daydreaming about the way Sebastian would might—"I'm not asleep," she said brightly. "The eclogue was utterly fascinating."

Arabella snorted. "Tell it to the birds. I was asleep, if no one else was."

But Lord Winnamore just grinned. "Do you good to hear a bit of the classics," he told her mildly.

"Not if they're that dreary. I've no need for them. Am I right in

thinking that the whole thing was praise for a dead man?"

When Lord Winnamore nodded, Arabella rolled her eyes. "Cheerful." Then she turned to the company at large. "Let's see, we'll just put that painful experience behind us, shall we? Who wants to go next?"

Esme shot Helene an encouraging look. She was sitting bolt upright on a wing chair, looking desperately uneasy. As Esme watched, Bea handed Helene a small leather book, open in the middle.

Helene turned even paler, if that were possible. She seemed terrified. "Helene!" Esme called across the room. "Would you like to read a poem, or shall we save your performance for tomorrow?" But Esme saw in Helene's eyes terror mixed with something else: a steely, fierce determination.

"I am quite ready," she answered. She stood up and walked over to the fireplace to stand where Lord Winnamore had been. Then she turned and smiled at Stephen Fairfax-Lacy. Esme almost applauded. No one could call that a lascivious smile, but it was certainly cordial.

"I shall read a poem entitled 'The Shepherdess's Complaint,' " she said.

"Lord, not another bloody shepherd!" Arabella muttered.

Lord Winnamore sent her an amused look. "Lady Godwin did say shepherdess, not shepherd."

Helene was starting to feel reckless. It was too late for second thoughts. Fairfax-Lacy would come to her bed, and then she would flauntyes, flaunt him in front of Rees.

She threw Stephen another smile, and this one truly was warm. He was going to make it happen. What a lovely man!

"Well, do go on," Arabella said rather impatiently. "Let's kill off this shepherdess, shall we? Lord, who ever thought that poetry was so tedious?"

Helene looked again at Stephen Fairfax-Lacy, just to make certain that he realized he was the benefactor of her poetry reading, and began:

If it be sin to love a sweet-faced Lad,

Whose amber locks trussed up in golden trammels

Dangle down his lovely cheeks with joy

"Trammels?" Arabella interrupted. "Trammels? What the devil is the poet talking about?"

"The man in question has his hair caught up in a net," Winnamore told her. "Trammels were used by fishermen" Helene cast him a look as well, and he fell silent. She felt rather like a schoolmistress. One kind of look for Stephen, a look that said Come to my room ! Another kind of look for Lord Winnamore Hush in the back, there ! "I shall continue," she announced.

When pearl and flower his fair hair enamels

If it be sin to love a lovely Lad,

Oh then sin I, for whom my soul is sad.

Helene had to grin. This was perfect! She looked down at Bea with thanks, but Bea jerked her head almost imperceptibly at Stephen. Obediently, Helene looked at Stephen again. It was getting easier to smile at the man. And all this talk about sin had to make it clear what she had in mind.

O would to God (so I might have my fee)

My lips were Honey, and thy mouth a Bee.

Then shouldst thou sucke my sweete and

and my

Helene stopped. She could feel crimson flooding up her neck. She couldn't read this stuff !

"That's a bit of all right!" Arabella called. "Lady Godwin, you are showing unexpected depths!"

But Esme was crossing the room and taking the book from Helene, who seemed to be frozen in place. "It's too deep for me," she said, giving Helene a gentle push toward her chair. "I am a respectable widow, after all." She glanced down at Bea and then decided not to

ask that minx to read. "I think we have time for only one more poem tonight." It wasn't that she was particularly anxious to retire to her room except that Sebastian might be waiting for her. A lady never kept a gentleman waiting.

"Mr. Fairfax-Lacy," she said, turning to him, "did you find a poem that you liked in my library?"

"I did. And I'd be most pleased to read it," he said, getting up. "Now as it happens, mine is also supposedly written by a shepherd."

"Who would have thought," Arabella said in a jaundiced voice, "that sheepherders were quite so literary?"

Helene's heart was racing with humiliation. How could she have read those words aloud? Why why hadn't she read the poem before accepting it from Bea? She should have known that any poem Bea chose would be unacceptable. Finally she drew a deep breath and looked up at Stephen.

She met his eyes. They were utterly kind, and she felt imperceptibly better. In fact, he grinned at her.

"I'm afraid that my poem is far less interesting than was Lady Godwin's," he said with a little bow in her direction, "but then, so am I."

That's a compliment! Helene thought. Mr. Fairfax-Lacy had a lovely voice. It was deep and rolled forth, quite as if he were addressing the entire House.

Ah beauteous Siren, fair enchanting good,

Sweet silent rhetoric of persuading eyes

He paused and looked directly at Helene. She felt an unmistakable pang of triumph. He'd understood her! She stopped listening for a moment and wondered which of her night rails she should wear. It wasn't as if she had any luscious French confections such as Esme presumably wore when she embarked on an affair.

But slowly she was drawn back into listening, if only because Stephen's voice was truly so beautiful. He made each word sound as if it were of marvelous meaning.

Such one was I, my beauty was mine own,

No borrowed blush, which bank-rot beauties seek,

The newfound shame, a sin to us unknown,

The adulterate beauty of a falsified cheek ...

"I'm not sure I like this one any more than the first poem," Arabella said grumpily to Lord Winnamore. "Feel as if I'm being scolded. Falsified cheek indeed! And what's a bank-rot beauty ? We've none of those in this room."

"It was not so intended at all, Lady Arabella, I assure you," Stephen said, glancing down at Bea to make sure she was listening. She was curled up on a stool like a little cat. He could see a bewitching expanse of breast. Naturally her bodice was the size of his handkerchief.

The adulterate beauty of a falsified cheek,

Vile stain to honor and to woman also,

Seeing that time our fading must detect,

Thus with defect to cover our defects.

"Enough of that!" Arabella said briskly. "Last thing I need is a lecture about what time is doing to my face, and you'll be lucky, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy, if I don't take it amiss that you've even mentioned fading in my presence!"

"I'm truly sorry," Stephen said. "Naturally I viewed this poem as utterly inapplicable to anyone in this room." He bowed and kissed Arabella's hand. "I certainly detect no fading in your beauty, my lady." He gave her a look of candid repentance, the one he used when his own party was furious because he had voted for the opposition.

"Humph," Arabella said, somewhat mollified.

He'd made his point; he was fairly certain that he saw a gleam of fury in Lady Beatrix's eyes. Now he intended to pursue the more important goal of the evening.

Helene found with a start that Stephen Fairfax-Lacy was drawing her to her feet. "May I show you a volume of poetry that I discovered while searching for a suitable text for this evening?" he said, nodding toward the far end of the room.

Helene rose lightly to her feet. "I'd be most pleased," she said, steadying her voice. She put her fingers on his arm. It was muscled, as large as Rees's. Were all gentlemen so muscled under their fine coats?

They walked across the room until they reached the great arched bookshelves at the far end. Once there, Helene looked up at Stephen inquiringly, but he didn't pull a volume from the shelf.

"It was merely an excuse to speak with you," he said with an engaging smile. "You seemed startled by the content of your poem, and I thought you might like to escape the company for a moment."

Helene felt that traitorous blush washing up her neck again. "Well, who wouldn't be?" she said.

"Lady Beatrix Lennox?" he said, and the note of conspiratorial laughter in his voice eased Helene's humiliation.

"She did give me the poem to read," Helene admitted.

"I thought so." He took her hand in his. "You have lovely fingers, Lady Godwin. Musician's hands."

Her hands looked rather frail in his large ones. Helene quite liked it. She never felt frail.

"And I thought your waltz was truly exquisite." He was stroking her fingers with his thumb. "You have an amazing talent, as I'm sure you know."

Helene's heart melted. No one ever praised her music. Well, she rarely allowed her music to be played in public, so no one had the opportunity. But she melted all the same. "It's rather a daring piece," she murmured, watching his fingers on her hands.

"How so?"

"Because it's a waltz," she explained. He truly didn't seem to understand, so she elaborated. "The waltz is considered unforgivably fast, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy. You do know that it hasn't been introduced to Almack's yet, don't you?"

He shrugged. "I haven't been to Almack's in years, and I count myself lucky."

"Respectable women seldom dance the waltz, and they certainly don't write them."

"I enjoyed it." He was smiling down at her, and she felt a little thrill all the way to her toes. "Was that the very first waltz that you have written?"

"No." She hesitated. "But it is the first to receive a public airing."

"Then the fact that I danced it is truly one of the greatest honors of my life," he said, with another elegant bow.

Mr. Fairfax-Lacy was truly truly all that was admirable. "Would you consider," she asked impulsively, "coming to my chamber tonight?"

He blinked, and for one dreadful moment Helene had an icy sense of error. Horror swept up her spine.

But he was smiling and bowing. "You anticipated my own question," he said, kissing the very tips of her fingers. "May I pay a visit to your chambers later this evening?"

"I'd like that very much," Helene managed. His smile deepened. He really is handsome, she told herself.

"I believe it is time to retire, Lady Godwin. Our hostess appears to be taking her leave."

"Yes, lovely," Helene said breathlessly. So this is how it was done! How simple, really. She invited; he accepted. She almost pranced back across the library on his arm. Esme twinkled at her. Bea kissed her cheek and whispered something Helene couldn't hear. Probably advice. Arabella frowned a little; she had probably only just realized that her scheme to marry Esme to Mr. Fairfax-Lacy was in danger.

Helene felt a surge of triumph. She had just taken the most eligible man in the house and summoned him to her room! She was not a frigid, cold woman as her husband had told her.

She had a lover!

Chapter 12

He wasn't in her chamber when Esme opened the door.

Of course, she was glad of that. What would her maid think, to find the gardener in her bedchamber? It sounded like a tidbit from a gossip rag: "A certain lady widow, in the absence of a husband, seems to be relying on her staff." Tomorrow she'd start her new life as a respectable mother. Of course she wouldn't take lovers once her baby was born for one thing, she could never risk having another child, since she had no husband.

But she couldn't seem to concentrate on her future respectability. Her whole body was humming, talking of the night to come. She felt almost dizzy. She and Sebastian had never had an assignation before. They'd made love once in a drawing room last summer. Then she had visited him in his gardener's hut a few times, but always on the spur of the moment. He had never come to her. Well, how could he?

She had never known beforehand that he would enter her room at night. That she would watch him undress. That he would lean over her bed with that smoldering look of his. Her inner thighs pricked at the thought.

"I feel particularly tired," Esme told her maid, Jeannie. "A bath immediately, please, with apricot oil." Jeannie chattered on about the household while Esme tried to ignore the fact that merely washing her body was making her feel ripe aware

Suddenly a tiny movement caught her eye. Her windows were hung with long drapes of a rich pale yellow. And under one of them poked the toe of a black boot. Not a gentleman's boot either. A gardener's boot.

A great surge of desire sank right to the tips of Esme's toes. He was watching. Her whole body sung with awareness of those hidden eyes. Jeannie had bundled her hair atop her head to keep it dry; Esme reached up as if to ascertain that no hairpins fell. Her breasts rose from the bath, drops of water sliding over her sleek skin. The curtain moved again, just the faintest twitch.

Esme smothered a grin and lay back against the edge of the bath. "My

skin is so dry these days," she said to Jeannie, hoping that the maid didn't notice that her voice seemed deeper. "May I have the oil, please?"

Jeannie poured some into her hand and slowly, very slowly, Esme opened her hand and let the sweet-smelling oil trickle first down her neck, and then down the slick curve of her breast. Jeannie was darting around the room, folding up clothes and talking a constant stream as she did so. Esme spread a hand across the swell of one breast. The oil sank into her moistened skin, turned it satiny smooth. The curtain moved again, and Esme smiled, a smile for him. For the man waiting for her. Those unseen eyes made a simple bath feel scandalous, forbidden made her feel sensuous and erotic. She raised her arms to her hair again, a ballet of tantalization.

The curtains swayed. He was watching

"Now, that's odd," Jeannie said, starting toward the windows. "I could have sworn I shut that window, but there must be a draft."

"There's no draft!" Esme croaked.

"I'll just make certain, my lady."

"No!"

Jeannie stopped short of the windows. "My lady?"

"I think that I shall take a longer bath than I expected. Why don't you go downstairs and"her mind was utterly blank"help Mrs. Myrtle with something?"

Jeannie looked utterly astonished, but at least she turned away from the windows. "But my lady, Mrs. Myrtle doesn't need my help! She's far too grand to ask me to do aught for her!"

That was likely true enough. Esme's housekeeper was a formidable sort of woman. "I would like to be alone," Esme said bluntly.

"Of course, my lady! I'll just return in ten minutes and"

"No! That is, I shall put myself to bed tonight."

Jeannie's mouth actually fell open. "But my lady, how will you rise from the bath? And if you fall? And"

Jeannie had a point, but Esme could hardly say that she had an

assistant at hand. "Help me up," she said, reaching out a hand. Jeannie brought her to her feet, and Esme stepped onto the warm rug next to the bath, grabbing the toweling cloth Jeannie held out. The last thing she wanted to do was give Sebastian a good look at the enormous expanse of her belly. He'd probably run for the entrance. Then she waved toward the door in dismissal.

Jeannie was obviously bewildered. "Shall I just return in"

"I will be quite all right," Esme said firmly. "Good night."

Jeannie knew a command when she heard one. She stood blinking for a second and then curtsied. She ran down the back stairs, utterly confused. She was that distracted that she actually told Mrs. Myrtle what had happened, although in the normal course of things she would never share an intimacy with that dragon of a housekeeper.

Mrs. Myrtle raised her eyebrows. In the old days, of course, such behavior would have meant that the missus had other plans for the evening. But obviously that wasn't the case. "Pregnant women are like that," she advised Jeannie. "Irrational as the day is long. My own sister ate nothing but carrots for an entire week. We all thought she'd turn orange. Never mind, Lady Rawlings will be as right as rain in the morning."

If Jeannie had but known, the very experienced maid, Meddle, who attended Helene, Countess Godwin, was just as bewildered. Her mistress had also ordered a bath. And then she had tried on all four night rails she'd brought with her, seeming to find fault with each. One wasn't ironed correctly, another had a pulled seam. Obviously her mistress had an assignation that evening. But with whom? "It's plain as a pig's snout," Mr. Andrews said, waving his fork about. "She must have an assignation with my gentleman, Lord Winnamore. He's had no success with Lady Withers, and he's decided to cultivate greener fields."

Andrews was a boisterous Londoner who had only served Winnamore for a matter of days.

"I do not agree," Mr. Slope said magisterially. As the butler, he never allowed even the mildest discussion of their mistress, but he had been known to lend the benefit of his expertise when it came to the foibles of other gentlepersons. And his expertise was considerable; everyone had to agree to that. After all, as butler to one of the most notorious couples in London for some ten years, he'd seen every sort of

depravity the peerage got up to.

Mrs. Myrtle raised an eyebrow. "You're not suggesting Mr. Fairfax-Lacy, my dear Mr. Slope? And do have a bit more of this pickled rarebit. I think Cook has outdone herself."

Mr. Slope chewed and swallowed before replying; his manners were an example to the understaff. "I am indeed suggesting Mr. Fairfax-Lacy."

"My gentleman a partner to adultery? Never!" Mr. Fairfax-Lacy's valet was on the naive and elderly side. Mr. Fairfax-Lacy had rescued him from near destitution, when the poorhouse had been staring him in the very face.

"It would be an act of kindness," Meddle pointed out. "What's poor Lady Godwin to do, then? Her husband left her ten years ago. If the stories be true it was before my time he put the missus out on the street. Made her take a common hackney to her mother's house. Didn't even allow her to take the carriage with her when she left! That's evil, that is."

"Ah, if it's an act of kindness you want, then Mr. Fairfax-Lacy is the one to do it," his valet said, leaning back satisfied.

"I think Lord Winnamore is an excellent choice," Andrews said stubbornly. "My master is known the breadth and length of London. And he's rich as well."

"He's known for faithful courtship of Lady Withers," Mr. Slope pointed out. "Now you, Mr. Andrews, have admitted to all of us that you are still green in service." A few of the younger footmen looked blank, so he explained, "Mr. Andrews has not served as a gentleman's gentleman for a great period of time."

"That's so," Andrews said. "Came to the business from tailoring," he explained. "I finished my apprenticeship and found I couldn't stomach the idea of twenty years of sewing. So I found this position."

"When you are further along, you will learn to read the signs. Now Mr. Winnamore where is he at this very moment?"

"Why, he's in bed, I suppose," Andrews said. "In bed with the countess!"

"You undressed him?"

"In a manner of speaking." Andrews had found to his great relief that his master didn't need any personal assistance. He didn't think he was up to pulling down another man's smalls, even for the sake of a steady wage.

"That proves it," Mr. Slope said with satisfaction.

"Why?"

"A gentleman doesn't undress before he visits a lady's chamber. What if he were seen in the corridor? He makes pretense that he is fetching a book from the library or some such." He chuckled. "There have been nights in this house when the library would have been empty of books, if all the stories were true!"

Andrews had to accept that. It sounded like the voice of experience. And Mr. Winnamore certainly hadn't looked as if he were planning an excursion down the hallway when Andrews left him. He'd been reading in bed, the same as he always did.

"Mr. Fairfax-Lacy, eh? He's a Member of Parliament, isn't he?" Andrews said, throwing in the towel.

"That's right," Mr. Slope nodded. "An esteemed one at that. Lady Godwin couldn't have chosen better. I wouldn't mind another bite of that shepherd's pie, Mrs. Myrtle, if you would be so good. Now, perhaps we should all discuss the proper manner of exiting a room during dinner, because I happened to notice this evening that young Liddin barged through that door as if a herd of elephants were after him."

Chapter 13

In Which Countess Godwin Learns Salutory Lessons about Desire

Helene was battling pure terror. If she could have thought of a way to send Mr. Fairfax-Lacy a note without creating a scandal in the household, she would have done so in a second. The note would have said that she had come down with scarlet fever and couldn't possibly entertain callers in her chambers.

She felt like like a bride! Which was incredibly ironic. She remembered distinctly waiting for Rees to walk into their room at the inn. They hadn't even married yet; they'd still been on their way to Gretna Green. But Rees had guessed, correctly, that her papa wouldn't bother to follow them, and so they'd stopped at an inn the very first night.

If only she had had enough character to walk out of that inn the very next morning and return, unmarried, to her father's house. She had waited in that chamber just like any other giddy virgin, her eyes shining. Because she'd been in love in love ! What a stupid, wretched concept. When Rees had appeared, it had been immediately clear that he'd been drinking. He'd swayed in the doorway, and then caught himself. And she fool that she'd been! had giggled, thinking it was romantic. What was romantic about a drunken man?

Nothing.

The very thought steadied her. Stephen Fairfax-Lacy would no sooner appear in his bride's doorway the worse for liquor than he would appear in Parliament dressed in a nightshirt. Which made her wonder whether he would come to her room in a nightshirt. If she simply pretended that he was no more unexpected than Esme paying her a visit

There was a knock on the door, and Helene almost screamed. Instead she tottered over to the door, opened it, and said rather hoarsely, "Do come in." He was fully dressed, which she found daunting. She was wearing nothing more than a cotton night rail. Helene straightened her backbone. She had survived marriage with Rees; she could survive anything .

He seemed to see nothing amiss, though. With a little flourish, he held up a flagon and two small glasses.

"How thoughtful of you, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy," she said.

He put the glasses on the table and walked over to her. "I think you might call me Stephen?"

His voice had that rich, dark chocolate sound that he must use to mesmerize the House of Commons.

"And may I call you Helene?"

Helene on his lips sounded French and almost exotic. She nodded and

took a seat by the fireplace. He sat down next to her and poured a little glass of golden liquor. Helene tried to picture what would happen next. Would he simply disrobe? Should she turn to the wall and allow him some privacy? How was she to take off her night rail? Luckily Mr. Fairfax-LacyStephenseemed perfectly content to sit in silence.

"I've got no practice with this sort of thing," she finally said, taking a gulp of the liquor. It burned and glowed to the pit of her stomach.

He reached out and took her hand in a comforting sort of way. "There's nothing very arduous to it, Helene. You and your husband have not lived together for years, have you not?"

"Almost nine years," Helene said, feeling that inextricable pang again. It was just that she hated to admit to such a failure.

"You cannot be expected to go to your grave without companionship," he said. His thumb was running gently over the back of her hand, and it felt remarkably soothing. "As it happens, I have never met a woman whom I wished to marry. So I am also free to take my pleasure where I may, and I would very much like to take it with you."

Helene could feel a little smile trembling on her lips. "I'm just worried about about" But how did one ask bluntly when he was going to leave? If he spent the night with her and her maid found out, she would die of shame.

"I am perfectly able to prevent conception," he said. He moved his hand, and her fingers slipped between his.

Helene's heart skipped a beat. She wanted a child—desperately, in fact. But not this way. "Thank you, that would be very kind," she said, feeling the ridiculousness of it. Oh for goodness' sake, perhaps they should just get it over with, and then she could begin the process of curdling Rees's liver. "Would you like to go to bed now?" she asked.

He stood looking at her for a moment and nodded. "It would be a pleasure, my dear."

Helene crawled into her bed and pulled the covers up. "I shall close my eyes so as to give you some privacy," she said. Surely he would be grateful for that small kindness. After all, there was no reason why they had to behave like wild animals simply because they were embarking on an affair.

A moment later she felt the bed tilt slightly as he got under the covers. She opened her eyes and hastily shut them again. He was leaning over her, and he hadn't any shirt on. "You forgot to snuff the candles," she said in a stifled voice.

"I shall do so immediately," he replied.

Stephen was so different from Rees. His voice was always calm and helpful, ever the gentleman. Would Rees have snuffed the candles on her request? Never. And Rees's chest was all covered with black hair, whereas Stephen's was smooth. Almostalmost feminine, except that was such a disloyal thought that she choked it back.

He returned to bed, and she made herself turn toward him. Thank goodness, the room had fallen into a kind of twilight, lit only by the fireplace off to the side. She took a deep breath. Whatever happened, she was ready.

Except that nothing happened for a few moments.

If the truth be known, Stephen was rather perplexed. Helene clearly wanted to have an affair. But she wasn't exactly welcoming. That's because she's a true English lady, and not a trollop, he told himself, dismissing the image of Bea's creamy breasts that popped up, willy-nilly, to his mind. He had doubts about those breasts anyway. They'd seemed slightly skewed to the left after she'd wriggled herself out of her spencer in the goat pasture.

With a start he realized that he was in quite a different bed and should be thinking very different thoughts. He bent over and kissed Helene. Her lips were cool and not unwelcoming. He slipped his hands around her shoulders. Her husband must have been something of a boor; the poor woman was trembling, and not with passion.

But Stephen was nothing if not patient. He kissed her slowly and delicately, each touch promising that he would be a gentleman, that he would be slow, that she could take her pleasure as she would. And slowly, slowly, Helene stopped trembling. She didn't exactly participate, though. He kept having to push away fugitive thoughts about the way Bea had made little sounds in her throat when he kissed her in the goat pasture.

Twenty minutes later, he judged that they had reached a point at which she wouldn't mind being touched. He ran a hand down her shoulder and edged toward her breasts. Helene gasped and went rigid again.

"May I touch your breast?" he whispered. A small voice in the back of his head was saying quite obstinately that this was all extraordinarily unexciting. The last woman he bedded who'd shown as little initiative as Lady Godwin had been his very first. And she was all of fifteen, as was he. But Lady GodwinHelenewas clearly trying.

"Of course you may," she whispered.

It was the whisper that did it. The very small trickle of desire that had crept into his veins died on the spot. She was being polite, and she was being brave. Neither emotion did much for Stephen's desire. The desire he had wilted, in all senses of the word. He slid his hand very carefully around her back and pulled her close. She felt rather like a fragile bird, nestled in his arms. Then he rested his chin on her hair and said, "I thought I knew why I was here, but now I'm not sure that I do."

There was silence. Then: "Because we are beginning an affair?"

He couldn't even tell where all that desperation was coming from. From the idea of bedding him? In that case, why on earth was she putting herself through such an ordeal?

He chose his words very carefully. "Generally, when a couple embarks on such a a relationship, it is because they feel a mutual attraction. I certainly think you are a beautiful woman"

Helene chimed in with the exquisite manners that accompanied everything she said or did. "You are extremely handsome as well."

"But do you really wish to sleep with me?" He ran a coaxing hand down her arm.

When she finally spoke, it sounded as if she were near tears. "Of course!"

"I've never been so attractive that a woman felt she must bed me," Stephen said teasingly, trying to lighten the atmosphere. It didn't work. He could feel his chest growing damp from her tears. Damn it, the whole day was a fiasco, from beginning to end.

"I should never have done it," Helene said shakily, wiping tears away as fast as she could. "I simply thought" Her voice trailed off.

Stephen was struck by a sudden thought. "Did you think to use me to prove adultery?" That would destroy his career in two seconds flat

notion that didn't seem to bother him as much as it should.

"No," Helene sobbed. "I would never have used you in such a way. I thought we mightwe might enjoyand then I could tell my husband, and" Her voice trailed off.

They lay there for a while, a lanky English gentleman and a sniffing countess. "I'm sure my face is quite red," Helene said finally.

Her wry tone told Stephen that she had regained control. Her face was indeed all red, and her hair was starting to fall out of its braid into wisps around her face. For some reason, he found it very sweet that she hadn't even known enough about an assignation with a man to loosen her hair.

"Helene," he said gently, "this isn't going to work."

"Why not?"

He blinked and realized her surprise was genuine. "Because you don't truly wish to make love to me," he pointed out.

Helene could have screamed with vexation. How stupid could the man be! If she didn't want to make love to him, would he be in her room? Would she have humiliated herself by appearing in dishabille before a man? Would she have allowed an unclothed man anywhere in her vicinity? "I do wish to make love to you," she managed.

He reached out and rubbed away a tear. "I don't think you do," he said, and there was a sweet look on his face.

A sweet, condescending look.

A whole flood of naughty wordsthe words she had been taught not to use, and indeed, had never even used in thoughtcame to Helene's mind. "That's rot ," she said. "You're a man. Men always want to make love to women under any circumstances. Everyone knows that."

Stephen bit his lip, and Helene had a terrible feeling he was trying to keep back a smile. "They generally like to feel that the lady they are with is willing."

"I am willing!" Helene said, hearing her voice rising. "How much more willing can I be?"

He looked embarrassed now. "Perhaps I'm not phrasing this correctly."

"I'm willing!" Helene said. She reached up and wrenched open the buttons that ran down the front of her night rail. "Go ahead. Do whatever you wish."

For a moment they both just stared at Helene's breasts. They were small in comparison to Esme's, but they had a nice jaunty air to them. At least that's what Helene thought until she forced herself to look at Stephen. He looked absolutely mortified. But Helene was starting to enjoy herself. It seemed that she was capable of shocking people!

She wriggled her night rail back over her shoulders so it pooled around her waist. "Now if I remember this whole procedure correctly from my marriage," she said, feeling a slightly hysterical giggle coming, "you should be overcome by lust at this point. At least, my husband always was."

Stephen looked almost goggle-eyed. "He was? I mean, of course he was!"

At this point one obviously laughed or cried. Helene chose to laugh. There was only so much humiliation a woman could take in one evening. She folded her hands over the top of the sheet and grinned at Stephen, quite as if they were at a tea party. "I suppose we could have an old-fashioned game of 'you show me, I show you,'" she said. "Or we could simply give it up."

His eyes flew to hers, and the relief in them was palpable.

"I gather that I need more practice before I can induce a man to actually stay in my bed," Helene said. "I have to tell you, Stephen, that it is quite a personal triumph that I lured you into my bedchamber at all."

He reached over and pulled the sheet up above her breasts, tucking it about her, quite as if he were tucking a child in at night. Then he said, "Now you'll have to explain to me, Helene, exactly why you lured me up here. After all, your husband is not a member of this house party."

Helene swallowed. But he deserved a real explanation. "I want a divorce. But when I asked my husband whether we could simply manufacture the evidence of my adultery, he laughed and said no one in the world would believe that I was adulterous. It has to be a woman's adultery that dissolves a marriage, you know. It's grotesquely unfair, but the letter of the law."

"I agree with you," Stephen said, nodding. "Especially in cases such as

yours, there ought to be other provisions. And I'm sure there will be changes to the law, in time. So"

"So I thought perhaps you and I we might" Helene trailed off and then stiffened her backbone. For goodness' sake! She was half naked in bed with the man; she might as well be frank. "I like you very much," she said, looking into his eyes. "I thought perhaps we might have an affair, but I see now that I was mistaken. There's a great deal I don't understand about bedroom matters."

Stephen pulled her snug against his side again. "There's time."

Helene couldn't help grinning. Here she was in bed, half naked, and snuggled up to a naked man! If only Esme could see her now! Or Rees, for that matter! "It was a lowly impulse," she said, feeling more generous now that the acute sense of humiliation was gone. "I just wanted revenge. Rees laughed when I asked him for the divorce. He says I'm frigid, and no man would ever want me." Her tone had a bitterness that she couldn't hide.

Stephen's arm tightened. "That's cruel nonsense," he said firmly. They sat for a moment, Helene tucked against Stephen's shoulder while he thought about beating Rees Godwin into small pieces.

"Are you absolutely certain that it wouldn't work between us?" she asked.

Stephen looked down at her. "Are you trembling with desire because my arm is around you? Are you secretly wishing that I would push down your sheet and take your breast"

"No! No, I'm not," she said hastily, tucking the sheet more firmly under her arm. "All right. I accept that it won't work between the two of us. It's just such a shame, because you are quite perfect, and I'm not sure I have enough enough bravery to go through this again."

"Ah, but if you truly desired the man in question, it wouldn't take that much bravery."

Helene didn't agree at all, but she bit her tongue.

"It seems to me," Stephen said slowly, "that you're not quite certain that you wish for the affair itself, Helene. You are more interested in the appearance of an affair."

"True. At the heart I'm terribly prudish about marriage. I am married.

Or perhaps," she added, rather sadly, "I'm just prudish. That's what Rees would say."

"If only your husband could see you now," Stephen said, a mischievous glint in his eye.

"Yes, wouldn't that be wonderful? Because I do like you more every moment."

"The feeling is entirely mutual." He gave her a little squeeze.

"And there's no one else at this party whom I could even consider inviting to my bedchamber," she continued. "There's no hope for it. I shall have to wait until I can return to London, and that won't be for quite a while. I just wish that Rees knew where I am, right now!"

"Invite him," Stephen said, a wicked lilt in his voice.

"Invite him? Invite him where?"

"Here. Invite him to the house. We can make certain that he sees you in a compromising situation."

Helene gasped. "With you?"

"Exactly."

She started to giggle. "It would never work."

"I don't see why not. I've never met your husband. But I don't like what you've told me about him. So why not fashion a comeuppance for the man?"

"It would be wonderful," Helene breathed, imagining it. All the revenge without having to go through with the unpleasant bits. Could there be anything better?

"Unless there's a chance he might grow violent," Stephen said, thinking of various nasty stories he'd read over the years about irate husbands.

"Rees wouldn't bother. Truly. He lives with an opera singer, you know."

"I have heard that," Stephen admitted.

Helene clutched his arm. "Would you do it, Stephen, really? Would you do it for me? I would be so grateful; I can't even tell you how

much."

He looked down at her and laughed, and the joy of it came right from the heart. "Do you know what I do with my days? I try to win votes. I count votes. I bargain for votes. I beg for votes."

"That is very important work."

"It doesn't feel important. This feels more important. So, summon the philandering husband!" Stephen said magisterially. "I always wanted to play a part in a romantic comedy. Sheridan, Congreve here I come!"

Helene broke into laughter and he joined her, two proper, half-clothed members of the English peerage.

Chapter 14

Because the Library is Not Yet Emptied of Books

Bea was creeping down the corridor toward the main stairs and library when the laugh rumbled through a door just at her shoulder. She would know that laughter anywhere. There wasn't another man in London with such a lovely, deep voice as Mr. Puritan Fairfax-Lacy himself.

It wasn't that she didn't want Helene and Mr. Fairfax-Lacy to find pleasure in each other. Of course she did. Why, she was instrumental in bringing them together, wasn't she? She headed directly down the stairs, trying to erase all thoughts of what might have brought on the Puritan's delighted peal of laughter. What had Helene done? Did she know as much as Bea did about pleasuring a man? It seemed unlikely.

Probably that was the sort of laughter shared by people who don't know everything, who discover new pleasures together. She couldn't remember laughing while in bed with a man. She mentally revisited the three occasions in question. There had been a good deal of panting and general carrying on but laughter? No.

The thought made her a little sick, so she walked downstairs even faster. Once in the library she wandered around the shelves, holding her candle up high so she could read the titles. But it was no use.

The idea of returning to her cold bed was miserable. The idea of pretending to read one of these foolish books was enough to make a woman deranged. Instead she plunked down on a chilly little settee, drew up her feet under her night rail (a delicious, frothy concoction of Belgian lace that was far more beautiful than warm) and tried to think where things had gone wrong in her life.

The world would have said, without hesitation, that it was the moment when Lady Ditcher walked into a drawing room and was paralyzed with horror to see one of the Duke of Wintersall's daughters prostrate in the arms of a gentleman. Not that her arms were a problem, Bea thought moodily to herself. It was the sight of long white thighs and violet silk stockings. That's what had done the trick for Lady Ditcher.

But the truth was that the trouble started long before. Back when she was fifteen and fell in love with the head footman. Never mind the fact that Ned the Footman must have been thirty. She adored him. Alas, she wasn't very subtle about it. Her entire family knew the truth within a day or so. Finally her father sent the overly handsome footman to one of his distant country estates. He didn't really get angry, though, until he discovered she had been writing Ned the Footman letters, one a day, passionate, long letters

That's where she went wrong. With Ned the Footman.

Because Ned rejected her. She offered herself to him, all budding girlhood and thrilled with love, and he said no. And it wasn't to preserve his position, either. Ned the Footman wasn't interested. She could read it on his face. After her father transferred him to the country, he never answered a single letter. With the wisdom of time, she realized Ned may not have been able to read, but honesty compelled her to admit that he wouldn't have wanted to write back. He thought she was tiresome.

Ever since then, she seemed to be chasing one Ned after another except all the Neds she found were endlessly willing, and therefore endlessly tiresome.

She curled up her toes and rocked back and forth a little. She was certain that she wasn't merely a lusty trollop, as her father characterized her. She truly did want all those things other women wanted: a husband, a baby, two babies, love Real love, not the kind based on breasts propped up by cotton pads.

You've gone about the wrong way of finding that sort of love, she thought sourly. And it was too late now. It wasn't as if she could let her hair down and put away her rouge, and swear to never utter another profanity. She liked being herself; she truly did. It was just it was just that being herself was rather lonely sometimes.

"Oh damn it all," she said out loud, rubbing her nose hard to stop the tears from coming. "Damn it all! And damn Ned too!"

A slight noise made her look up, and there in the doorway was Mr. Laughing Lover himself, looking tall and broad-shouldered and altogether aristocratic. He could never be a footman. Not even Ned had looked at her with that distant disapproval, that sort of well-bred dismay. Of course, the man was sated by his midnight excursion. That alone would make him invulnerable to her charms, such as they were.

"Ned?" he said, eyebrow raised. "I gather the gentleman has not joined us but remains in your thoughts?"

"Precisely," she said, putting her chin on her knees and pretending very hard that she didn't mind that he had been with Helene. "And how are you, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy? Unable to sleep?"

"Something of the sort," he said, looking as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

Why on earth was he in the library instead of snuggling beside the skinny body of his mistress? Uncharitable thought, she reminded herself. You're the one with a padded bosom. The reminder made her irritable.

"So why are you in the library?" she asked. "I thought you had other fish to fry."

"A vulgar phrase," he said, wandering forward and turning the wick on the Argand lamp. "In fact, I came to see if I could find the book of poetry you gave to Lady Godwin."

"Why, are you having a private reading?" she asked silkily.

The minx was nestled on the settee, little pointed chin resting on her knees. She was curled up like a child, and with her hair down her back, she should have looked like a schoolgirl. It must be the dimple that gave her such a knowing look. That and the way her lips curled up, as if they were inviting kisses.

He walked over to her. "Why on earth did you give Lady Godwin that particular poem to read?"

"Didn't you like it?"

Close up, she didn't look like a child. Her hair was the color of burning coals. It tumbled down her back, looking as delectable and warm as the rest of her. "You've washed your face," he said. Ignoring the danger signals sent by his rational mind, he crouched down before her so their eyes were on the same level. "Look at that," he said mockingly. "I do believe that your eyebrows are as yellow as a daisy."

"Pinkish, actually," she said. "I absolutely loathe them. And in case you're planning to comment on it, my eyelashes are precisely the same color."

"It is rather odd. Why aren't they the same red as your hair?"

She hugged her knees tighter and wrinkled her nose. "Who knows? One of my sisters has red hair, and she has lovely eyelashes. But mine fade into my skin unless I color them."

"They're very long, though." He just stopped himself from touching them.

"And they curl. I should be grateful that I have material to work on. They look quite acceptable after I blacken them. Naturally, I never allow a man to see me in this condition."

"And what am I?" Stephen said. She was actually far more seductive like this than when she was being seductive, if only she knew. She smelled like lemons rather than a thick French perfume. Her lips were a gloriously pale pink, the color of posies in a spring garden.

"I suppose you are a man. But sated men have never interested me."

"What an extraordinarily rude person you are. And how unaccountably vulgar."

"I can't think why it surprises you so much," she said, seemingly unmoved by his criticism. "Surely you must have talked once or twice in your life to a woman who wasn't as respectable as yourself."

"Actually, brothels have never interested me. I have found ready companionship in other places."

Bea shrugged. He wasn't the first to imply that she belonged in such an establishment, although to her mind, that signaled his stupidity. There was a vast difference between taking occasional pleasure in a man's company and doing the same thing for money, and if he couldn't see the difference, he was as stupid as the rest.

"Where did you find that poem, anyway?" he said, getting up and walking toward the bookshelves.

"I brought it with me."

He swung around. "You travel about the country with a collection of libidinous poetry?"

"I have only just discovered Stephen Barnfield, and I like his poetry a great deal. The piece Helene read is by far his most sensuous. And it worked, didn't it? Called you to her side like a barnyard dog!"

"Not just a dog, but a barnyard dog?" he said, wandering back and sitting down next to her. His rational mind told him to stop acting like the said barnyard dog. And every cell in his body was howling to move closer to her.

"If you'd like to read the poetry yourself, I believe Lady Godwin left it on the table."

He grabbed the book and then returned to the settee and sat down again. He didn't want to look at Bea anymore. Her thick gold eyelashes were catching the firelight. "I shall borrow it, if I may," he said, leafing through the pages.

"I was surprised to find that you knew Spenser's poetry, for all you chose an unpleasantly vituperative bit to read aloud. You should have known that Lady Arabella would take it amiss if you read aloud poetry criticizing women for growing old."

"I wasn't criticizing age," he said, reaching out despite himself and picking up a lock of her hair. It was silky smooth and wrapped around his finger. "That poetry was directed at you and all your face painting."

"I gathered that." Bea felt as if little tendrils of fire were tugging at her legs, tugging at her arms, telling her to fall into his arms. She lay her head sideways on her knees and looked at him. He had dropped her hair and was reading the book of poetry. Who would have thought he liked poetry? He looked such a perfect English gentleman, with that

strong jaw and elegant cheek. Even after (presumably) shaking the sheets with Helene, he was as irreproachably neat and well dressed as ever. Only the fact that he wore no cravat betrayed his earlier activities.

"Where's your cravat?" she asked, cursing her own directness. She didn't want to know the answer, so why ask?

"I've found the poem." His eyebrows rose as he read. "Goodness, Bea, you are a surprising young woman."

"Only in my better moments. So where is your cravat?" He'd undoubtedly left it on the floor of Lady Godwin's room, lost as he'd wrenched it from his throat in his urgency to leap into bed with the chasteor not so chaste—countess. "Did you leave it on Helene's floor?" she asked, jealousy flooding her veins.

"No, I didn't," he said, looking at her over the book. The somber look in his eyes, that disapproval again, told her she was being vulgar.

She threw him a smoldering invitation, just to make him angry. It worked.

"I hate it when you practice on me," he observed, his eyes snapping. "You don't really want me, Bea, so don't make pretenses."

She threw him another look, and if he weren't so stupid, he would knowhe would see that it was real. That the shimmer of pure desire racing through her veins was stronger than she'd ever felt.

But he didn't see it, of course. He merely frowned again and then reached into his pocket and pulled out his cravat.

"Oh, there it is," she said, rather foolishly.

"A gentleman is never without a cravat," he said, moving suddenly toward her.

Bea raised her head, thinking he was finally, finally going to kiss her. A moment later he had tied the cravat neatly over her eyes. She felt him draw away and then heard the crackle of pages.

"Let me know when you wish to return to your chambers," he said politely, although any idiot could hear the amusement in his voice. "I think we'll both be more comfortable this way."

For a moment Bea sat in stunned silence. She didn't even move. She still had her arms around her knees. But she couldn't see a thing. Her senses burst into life. His leg was a mere few inches from hers, and her memory painted it exactly, since she couldn't see it: the way his muscles pulled the fine wool of his trousers tight when he sat. The way his shirt tucked into those trousers without the slightest plumpness. Even and no good woman would have noticed this, obviously the rounded bulge between his legs that promised pleasure.

Bea wiggled a little. It was worse than when she could see him. Sensation prickled along every vein, pooled between her legs. Perhaps if she leaned back against the couch and pretended to stretch? Her night rail was fashioned by Parisian exiles and made of the finest lace. Perhaps it could do what she could not seem to do: seduce him. At least make him feel a portion of the yearning desire she felt.

But she'd tried all of that before. It was a little embarrassing to realize how much she had tried to create a spark of lust in his eyes. She had rubbed against him like a cat, leaned forward and showed her cleavage so often he must worry she had a backache. None of it had created the slightest spark of interest in the man. Only when she'd been rained on and covered with mud had he kissed her.

Bea chewed her lip. Maybe she should just return to her room. Except honesty told her that she would no more leave his presence than she would stop breathing. Not when he might kiss her, when he might change his mind, when he might

Oh, please let the poem excite him, since I don't seem to be able to, she prayed to any heathen goddess who happened to be listening. Please let it work for me as well as it worked for Helene.

"If it be sin to love a sweet-faced Boy," he read.

His voice was so dark, so chocolate deep that it sent shivers down her spine. The poem certainly worked on her. Bea felt him lean toward her. She didn't let herself move.

"Whose amber locks trussed up in golden trammels, dangle down his lovely cheeks"

A wild shiver ran down Bea's back as his hand rested on her head.

"Your hair is darker than amber, Lady Beatrix. Your hair is more the color of"

"Wine?" Bea said with a nervous giggle. She felt utterly unbalanced by her inability to see. She was used to directing the conversation.

"Not rust. Beetroot, perhaps?"

"How very poetic of you. I prefer comparisons to red roses or flame."

"Beetroot has this precise blending of deep red and an almost orange undertone."

"Marvelous. Bea the Beetroot."

"Mellifluous," he agreed. "Of course, it might look less beetlike if you had pearls and flowers entangled in it like the boy in this poem. After all, his amber locks are let me see if I've got this right named with pearl and flowers."

"Flowers are not in style," Bea said dismissively. "A feather, perhaps. Pearls are so antiquated."

"If it be sin to love a lovely Lady," he read, "Oh then sin I, for whom my soul is sad."

Bea almost couldn't breathe. She wanted to drink that voice; she wanted that voice to drink her. She wanted that voice to tell her "You've changed the poem," she said rather shakily. "The line reads, 'If it be sin to love a lovely lad.'"

"There's no lad in my life whom I love," Stephen said. He couldn't not touch her for another moment. He closed the book and put it to the side. She was still curled like a kitten, strangely defenseless without those flashing eyes that seemed to send invitations in every direction. He rather missed them.

Dimly he noticed that his fingers were trembling as they reached toward her. He lifted her head and just rubbed his lips across hers. She sighed could it be that she wanted his kiss as he longed to give it? Her arms slipped around his neck.

But he didn't like the fact that those magnificent eyes of hers were covered. So what if they sent him a message they'd sent a hundred other men? He pulled the cravat off her head in one swift movement and then, before she could even open her eyes, he cupped that delicate face in his hands and kissed her again, hard this time, demanding a true response: one that she hadn't given another man.

Her lips didn't taste of the worldly smiles that so often sat there. They tasted sweet and wild, and they opened to him with a gasp of pleasure. He invaded her mouth, only meaning to tell her that he felt desire when he wanted to, not when she willed it.

But she tasted like lemons, sweet and tart, and her mouth met his with a gladness that couldn't be feigned. Nor could the shiver in her body when he pulled her against him, nor could the tightness with which she wound her arms around his neck. Oh, she was glorious, every soft, yielding inch of her. He longed to lick her whole body, to see if she tasted as tart and sweet behind her knees, and on her belly, and between her legs aye, there too. Because she would let him: he knew that without a doubt. All the respectable women he'd slept with, wives and widows, none of them had even dreamed of such a thing.

He had never even tried, knowing one can only take such liberties with a courtesan, a woman paid to accept the indignities of sensual activity. But Bea sweet, unmarried Bea

God, what was he doing?

He tore his mouth away and she leaned back toward him, her mouth bee-stung and her eyes closed. He went back for one last taste, just licked her mouth, except she opened to him and then her lips drew his tongue into her mouth. His hands turned to steel on her shoulders, even as his lower body involuntarily jerked toward her. Lust exploded in his loins at the precise moment that rage turned his vision dark.

"Where the devil did you learn that trick?" he said, pulling back.

She opened her eyes, and for a moment Stephen was bewildered: her eyes were so velvety soft, innocent seeming, dazzled looking. She must have looked dazzled for many a man. Even as he watched her eyes focus. But she didn't lose her languorous, desirous look.

"Do this?" she said softly, leaning forward. She almost took him by surprise, but he jerked back.

Bea sighed. Obviously the rake had turned back into a Puritan. She might as well infuriate him since he clearly wasn't planning on further kisses or anything else, for that matter. "I believe that was Billy Laslett," she said. Now she really wanted to return to her bedchamber. How excruciatingly embarrassing this was. "Lord Laslett now. since his father died a few months ago."

"Laslett taught you that kiss and didn't marry you?" Stephen asked,

feeling as if he'd been poleaxed.

"Oh, he asked," Bea said, standing up. Her knees were still weak. "He asked and asked, if that makes you feel any better."

Stephen felt sour and enraged. He stood up and towered over Bea. "At least you remember his name," he said with deliberate crudity.

Bea rolled her eyes. "There haven't been that many, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy. I'm only twenty-three. Ask me again when I'm fifty. But may I say that I am quite impressed with your stamina? After all, it's not every man in his forties who could frolick so gaily with a countess and then prepare such an impressive welcome for me." She let her eyes drift to his crotch.

Then she smiled gently at the outrage in his face and walked from the room, leaving Stephen Fairfax-Lacy alone in the library with a libidinous book of poetry.

And an impressive welcome.

Chapter 15

The Imprint of a Man's Skin

Esme was having second thoughts. Her heart was still pounding from the pure terror of seeing Jeannie move toward the windows. She wrapped the towel tighter around her shoulders. "This is a foolish idea. The babe is due any day now."

"Oh, I know that," he said with some amusement. "I can count as well as any, you know. Last July, when you and I met in Lady Troubridge's drawing room, is almost precisely eight and a half months ago."

"This is Miles's baby," she said, fully aware of just how obstinate she sounded. But it was terribly important to her that Miles have the child he wanted so much.

"Surely it has occurred to you that your certitude that this child is Miles's may be an error? After all, you had not yet reconciled with your husband when you and I enjoyed each other's company."

"Miles and I reconciled the very next night," Esme said hastily. But she knew it was of no use.

"This may well be my babe. Mine and yours. In fact, mathematically speaking, I believe that Miles and I are in a dead heat, given that we each had the pleasure of one night, and one night only."

"It is surely Miles's. He wanted a child so much!"

"Unfortunately, wishes have never influenced paternity in the past."

Esme had to acknowledge the truth of that statement. "Do you remember when I told you about my mother's letter? The one in which she told me that she didn't feel she could attend my confinement?"

"Of course." He began unbuttoning his shirt.

"She added a postscript saying that she hoped I knew who the father was. That was the worst of it. Because I don't know. If only we hadn't slept together, I could have written my mother an indignant letter, and perhaps she would have attended my confinement. Perhaps she would be here at this very moment."

"I trust not in this particular room," Sebastian said, pulling her into his arms. He smelled gloriously male and windswept. "I wish your mother felt differently."

His hand was so comforting on her back. It was no wonder that Esme kept blurting out every humiliating secret she had.

"I love you, do you know that?" he said.

She chose her words carefully. "I believe that you think you love me, Sebastian. But I know the guilt you feel because of Miles's death as well. There is no need to compensate for what happened, truly."

"Compensation has nothing to do with what I feel for you."

"How could it not?" she asked, looking into his clear blue eyes.

"Because when I fell in love with you, Miles was alive and sporting with his mistress," Sebastian said, watching her just as steadily. "I loved you all the time I was engaged to your friend Gina. I watched you dance; I watched you flirt; I watched you think about an affair with that abominable idiot, Bernie Burdett."

Esme turned away, wrapping her towel tighter around her shoulders. She would cry in a moment, and she needed to keep her head.

"Esme," he said.

She sat down heavily in a chair, heedless of the fact that her damp towel was likely to spot the pale silk. "I know you think you love me. But there's lust and then love. And I don't think you know the difference."

He watched her for a second. She bit back tears. Why couldn't he just see that it was impossible? She couldn't marry the man who had caused her husband's death. The scandal would never die, and she couldn't revisit that scandal on her child.

He walked over and picked her up.

"I must be straining all your gardener's muscles," she whispered, turning her face against his shirt.

"Not you," he said, carrying her to the bed. "I think we've talked enough, Esme mine. The night is long."

She felt the breath catch in her chest. But Sebastian was as methodical in seduction as he was in every other part of his life. He turned down the wicks and poked the fire before he returned to the bed. She watched the long line of his thigh and tried to remember if his legs had been so muscled last summer when he'd been a mere earl. Before he was a gardener. She didn't think so. His legs had been muscled, but not with the swelling sense of power they had now.

"Oh, Sebastian," she said, and the aching desire was there in her voice for anyone to hear.

He strode to the other side of the room to snuff yet another light. Firelight danced on his back. He must have done some work without a shirt because his skin was golden to his waist, and then it turned a dark honey cream over his buttocks. There were two dimples just there Esme found herself moving her legs restlessly, and she almost blushed. He had snuffed the candle and seemed to be inspecting the wick.

Finally he turned around. Esme's mouth went dry. He stood there with just a whisper of a smile on his face. He knew what he did to her. Firelight flickered over his thighs, over large hands, over golden skin, over

And still he smiled, that wicked, slow smile that promised everything.

"Was there something you wished?" he asked, mischief dancing in his eyes.

Esme felt nothing more than liquid invitation between her thighs. How had she survived even a single night without this without him? How could she survive another moment? "You are beautiful," she said, and the hoarseness in her own voice surprised her into silence. He sauntered over toward the bed, looking like Adonis and Jove all rolled into one: golden boy and arrogant king, sensual devil and English aristocrat.

It was no time to worry about what she looked like. If a woman is lucky enough to lure such a man into her bedchamber, it would be a true waste to let an enormous expanse of belly get in the way. So she sat up and reached for him. When he stood just before her, she wrapped her legs around his so he couldn't escape.

"I have you trapped," she said, smiling a little.

"And what will you do with me?" he said, and he wasn't smiling at all.

She reached up and ran her fingers over his nipples, felt the tiny tremor that rippled through his body, right down through his legs. Her fingers drifted south, touching muscled ridges, skin kissed by the sun, drifted around his bottom and pulled him even closer. He seemed to be holding his breath, silenced.

Whereas she she felt greedy and loving all at once. She wanted him never to forget her. In fact, had Esme admitted it, the thoughts she was having were hardly generous. Distilled, they ran like this: she couldn't marry him herself, but she could make it very, very hard for him to marry someone else.

And besides, she wanted him, every sun-ripened inch of him. There was no better place to start than the hard length of him, straining toward her even as he stood still. She bent forward and he said something, strangled in his throat, drowned by her warm mouth. She pulled him closer, hands on his muscled rump, and he arched, not pushing forward, simply a body exalting in pleasure.

The pleasure she was giving him. A shiver of delight pulsed down Esme's body, and she leaned even closer, torturing him, loving him. He arched his back again and groaned, a deep pulse of need that made Esme's heart pound.

But then he reached down and pushed her back onto the bed. She resisted for a second and then melted under the pressure of his powerful hands. She felt like the merest wisp of a girl, lying back on the bed with Sebastian towering over her. "I can't wait," she said, her voice revealingly hoarse. But there was no room for embarrassment between them.

Powerful hands pulled her to the edge of the bed. He leaned over her, cupping her face in his hands, kissing her until she was senseless, delirious, but not so lost that she didn't feel him there.

Asking.

"You do remember," he said some time later, and now that wicked grin was back, "that I'm a virgin, don't you?"

She couldn't help laughing.

"Not anymore."

Sebastian's voice was an amused, dark whisper against her skin. "Do you remember the night when you took my virginity, Esme?" His hand was on her womb. "This child might well be mine," he said into her hair.

"Or Miles's," she said, but the shrillness of her tone was wearisome even to her. She closed her eyes and leaned back against his shoulder, letting him continue his gentle caress.

"It makes me very happy." She could hear the joy in his voice. "The very thought of the child."

"And what if we married, and the child was Miles's? You would never know."

"I would love him or her as my own," he said. "I would never do otherwise, Esme."

"I know," she said, humbled by the look on his face.

"If you allow me to have a place in this child's life," he said, cupping her belly in his warm hand, "propriety will not be foremost on my mind. I'm not criticizing Miles's wish that you become a respectable woman. But I don't think it's the most important aspect of raising a child either." She couldn't see his face because a lock of hair had fallen

over his eyes.

He leaned forward and dropped butterfly kisses on her stomach. "You have to understand that I don't want to imitate my father, for all you wish to imitate your mother. He was quite respectable. I have trouble remembering his first name."

She reached out and pushed the hair back so she could see his eyes.

"You'll be a wonderful mother, Esme."

She bit her lip hard. It was that or cry, and she had firmly resolved not to cry. "I worry," she said, and her voice cracked.

"Nothing to worry about. The child is lucky to have you."

"I couldn't I didn't" The tears were corning anyway. They blinded her.

"Why on earth are you worried, sweetheart?"

"Benjamin," she said, "just my brother Benjamin. You do remember that he died as a baby? I'm afraid. I'm I'm just afraid."

"Of course I remember that you told me of Benjamin." He folded her in his arms then, and rocked her back and forth. "Nothing will happen to your baby. I promise you."

They fell asleep together, she curled in his arms as if he could protect her from all the evils that life could offer. When she woke, hours later, Sebastian was still holding her against his chest. The fire had burned out, and the room had taken on a pearly, luminous light. He was sleeping, lashes thick against his cheeks. His hair gleamed as if it were gilt. All her fear seemed to have been burned away.

"Sebastian," she said, and his eyes opened immediately.

They looked black in this light. She licked her lips and tasted salt tears and desire.

"How are you?" His voice was deep with sleep.

It set off a quiver between her thighs. "I don't think that I have the imprint of your body on mine yet," she whispered.

"Oh?" He raised one eyebrow. How had she ever thought he was a priggish Holy Willy ? She must have been blind.

"Not at all." She shook her head sadly. "I'm sorry. All your efforts don't seem to have succeeded."

"You'll have to excuse my failures." His voice purred with seductive power. "I am practically a virgin." One hand brushed over her nipple, returned, returned again.

A strangled little sigh came from Esme's throat.

"I need practice." His voice was dark, guttural, possessive. A shiver of ecstasy jolted Esme's spine. "You will have to give me another chance."

She couldn't answer. His lips had replaced his hands, and his hands had drifted lower. He was fierce and possessive, and he left no space for words. All Esme could do was try to stop the broken moans that came from her chest. But she had his smooth skin to put her mouth to, all those muscles to shape with her tongue.

It was around an hour later that he asked her a question. "Did you ever read Romeo and Juliet?"

"Well, of course. I only read it once. She was daft to kill herself for the sake of that lovelorn boy, that I remember."

"My hardheaded Esme," he said, dropping a kiss on her nose. "That's the sound of the lark outside your bedchamber window. I must leave soon."

The light filtering in her window was a watery yellow, filtered through spring leaves. Esme didn't want to acknowledge what those greenish ribbons of light meant. "Would you massage my back?" she asked, ignoring the whole exchange.

Sebastian pushed his thumbs into the very base of Esme's spine. She seemed to have forgotten that mornings always come. That she had told him to leave at the very first light. The sun was pouring under the curtains, and her maid would arrive any moment. She moaned like a woman in ecstasy. Her gorgeous hip rose from her waist like a creamy wave.

"My back hurts more than normally this morning," Esme said in a fretful voice. "You don't suppose we did it any injury, do you?"

Sebastian rolled her over on her back and grinned down at the huge mound of belly that reared between them. "Not the slightest," he said, rubbing a little hello to the babe. His babe.

"I suppose you should make your way out of here," Esme said, eyeing him. She had a distinctly jaundiced and irritable air. "Where are you planning to travel, anyway?"

"I've always enjoyed France," he said rather evasively.

If he didn't wish to give her his direction, that was quite all right. "Well, drink some champagne for me," Esme managed.

"Don't you wish to give me a weeping farewell?"

"I'm not up to hysterical farewells at the best of times," Esme snapped. She struggled up on her elbows and then Sebastian helped her to her feet. "You'll have to leave, because Jeannie will appear soon."

Sebastian smiled to himself. Esme was protecting that vulnerability of hers, the heart she hid amidst all her seductions and flirtations. The heart she had never given to anyone but him, he thought. Although she didn't seem to know it.

He bundled a dressing gown around her and pushed her glorious tumbling locks back over her shoulders. "You're beautiful in the morning," he said, cupping her face in his hands.

"I am not," Esme said, pulling away. "I have a perfectly foul taste in my mouth and my back hurts like the devil. I am not in the mood for sentiment, Bonnington, and so I'll thank you to find your way out before the household awakes."

Sebastian obediently pulled on his trousers and shirt as she watched. He was buttoning the last button on his placket when he realized that tears were sliding down her face. "Sweetheart." He pulled her into his arms. "Don't cry."

"I can't help it," Esme said, sobbing. "I know you have to go you have to go !but I'm so lonely without you. I'm a fool, a weak, silly fool. I'm just I'm just"

"I love you, Esme," he said, finally. "If you need me, just ask. I'll always come to you."

"I need you to leave! I can't have an earl hiding as a gardener on my estate. Everyone will know in a matter of minutes, and my reputation will be blackened, more than it is already."

He handed her a handkerchief.

"Thank you. And I wouldn't even mind my reputation being ruined," she wailed, "except for the baby. But you know all this, Sebastian, you know it, and I know it, and—and there's nothing to be done. So please, go ."

He didn't move.

"Go !" She looked at him, face shiny with tears, eyes red, a handkerchief balled in her hands, and Sebastian knew that he would never love anyone so much as he loved her.

He leaned forward and kissed her quite simply on the lips. "Good-bye," he said. Then he put his hands over her belly. "And good-bye to you, little one."

"Oh God, I can't bear it!" Esme said, her breath caught on a sob. "You have to leave, or I'll lose my resolve. Please go."

He slipped through the door and looked to the right and left. He'd entered Esme's chamber by means of one of the ladders being used to fix the roof; he had never actually been in the upper reaches of her house before.

Suddenly there was a polite cough, almost at his shoulder. "If I might help you, my lord?"

He swung about to find Esme's butler bowing before him. "Slope, isn't it?" Sebastian asked.

"Just so, my lord."

"I know your mistress trusts you implicitly. I trust her loyalty is not misplaced."

"Absolutely not," Slope replied, with just a tinge of offense in his voice.

"A workman, Rogers, is stealing slate and selling it in the village," Sebastian told him. "You might want to tell the foreman such. And I am leaving Lady Rawlings's employ, so you'll have to find a new gardener."

Slope bowed again. "I am most grateful for the information, my lord. May I direct you toward the side door, under the circumstances?"

"Thank you," Sebastian said, walking into the light of dawn.

Chapter 16

The Unexpected Pleasure of Your Company

Esme placed compresses on her eyes for a full hour, but it didn't reduce the swelling in her eyes. When Arabella entered her room, she advised a cucumber mask, but that didn't help, either. Esme suspected there wasn't much one could do to plaster over a broken heart. I sent him away because I had to, she told herself fiercely. The only problem was that he'd actually left. That was the worst of it: the petty, mean, screaming little voice in the back of her head that kept saying, He wouldn't have left if he really loved you! If he really

And then the tears would well up again, because why should Sebastian be any different from the other men she'd known? Miles never really loved her. Sebastian said he loved her, and perhaps he did. But it felt like a stab in the heart. If he loved her, really loved her, he wouldn't have left, no matter how many times she commanded. Didn't he know how many women died in childbirth? Didn't he care?

The ache in her chest answered that. He did care. He just didn't care as much as she wanted him to care. You chased away Miles by creating a scandal, Esme thought dully. And then you chased away Sebastian in order to avoid a scandal. But it was all the same, really. If either man had truly loved her, he wouldn't have left. He would have fought for her. But Miles had just smiled politely and slipped away to other pursuits, other bedchambers Sebastian smiled painfully and slipped away to the Continent to protect her reputation. It was exactly the same situation. Apparently she was the kind of woman whom men found easy to leave.

The tears welled up so fast and furious that Esme felt she would never stop crying. But she did, finally. More cucumber compresses and an hour later, she even thought drearily about going downstairs. The only reason she would consider it was to talk to Helene. She was faintly curious about the outcome of the previous evening.

Any questions were answered when she entered the sitting room. Helene looked happier than Esme had ever seen her, sitting across from Stephen Fairfax-Lacy and playing chess. An utterly suitable game for such an intelligent couple. She herself didn't even know how to

play.

"Hello," she said, standing at Helene's shoulder. Stephen immediately jumped to his feet and gave Esme his chair. She sank gratefully into it as Helene waved Stephen away with a smile. He bowed and pressed a kiss into her palm before strolling off. They certainly seemed to have got themselves on intimate terms in a hurry. Well, a shared bed could do that.

"Esme!" Helene said with a huge smile, "would you mind terribly if we invited Rees to make a brief visit?"

Esme blinked. Had she heard correctly? "Rees? Rees, your husband, Rees?"

Helene laughed. "Of course, that Rees."

"Naturally you may invite anyone you wish," Esme said. She looked around a bit sourly. Winnamore and Arabella were practicing a duet on the harpsichord. Bea seemed, rather surprisingly, to be embroidering something. "No one else is taking notice of the fact that I am in confinement, so why should you?"

For her part, Helene suddenly brought Esme's face into focus. For goodness' sake, what was wrong with Esme? She looked utterly haggard and was obviously out of sorts. "I am being utterly thoughtless," she said repentantly. "Of course I won't invite Rees to the house. Esme, what's the matter?"

Esme ground her teeth. Her nerves were on the edge of total distraction. "I didn't say you shouldn't invite him!" she snapped. "Clearly there is a house party occurring, so why not invite one more? At least it would go toward evening out our numbers, and that will make Arabella happy."

Helene hesitated. "I don't know if he will come."

"More to the point, why on earth would you wish him to? I can assure you that these friendships are better conducted away from one's husband." Lord knows, she was an expert on that subject.

"Not in my case," Helene whispered. "Esme, we are going to flaunt ourselves in front of Rees!"

"Haunt yourself?" Esme repeated. Her back felt as if a carriage had driven over it. That was Sebastian's fault. Last night had obviously

been far too energetic for a woman in her condition. Perhaps she would be permanently crippled.

"He's agreed to it," Helene whispered.

"Agreed to what?" Esme asked.

"Flaunting!"

"Oh for God's sake," Esme snapped. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"Stephen and I are going to demonstrate to Rees that I am not undesirable and frigid," Helene said. There was a high, startled color in her cheeks, but she looked straight at Esme.

"Rees never said that!" Esme narrowed her eyes. "That reprobate dared to say such a thing to you!"

Helene nodded.

"It's a good thing he's not here," Esme said through clenched teeth. "I'd tear him limb from limb. Men are all the same. Lechers and knaves, all of them!"

"You seem to be in a less than excellent humor," Helene said, examining her closely. "Didn't you sleep last night, Esme? You have marked circles under your eyes. How do you feel? Is the baby on the way?"

"No. Once a day the midwife emerges from the kitchen, prods me, and announces that nature must take its course. I'm so tired of that phrase!" Esme put her head on the back of the chair. On the ceiling of the salon, overindulgent-looking gods and goddesses shaped from plaster were eating grapes dangled in the air by cupids. The goddesses were all slim. Very slim. Probably Esme would never be able to shed the extra weight she'd gained.

"What do you think of my plan?" Helene asked.

Esme blinked at her. "Plan? What plan?"

"Esme," Helene said firmly, "you are not yourself. Would you like me to accompany you to your chamber?"

Esme was trying to think about whether that would make her feel worseindeed, whether anything could make her feel worsewhen Slope

appeared in the doorway.

"My lady," he said, and there was a warning note to his voice that made every head in the room turn. "The Marchioness Bonnington has arrived to pay a brief visit."

Esme straightened up as if she'd heard the last trumpet itself. She clutched Helene's arm. "It can't be!"

Helene obviously sensed danger. "What on earth is Lady Bonnington doing here? Her son is on the Continent. I certainly hope she is not planning to call you to account for his actions last summer! I shall rout her instantly, if that's the case," Helene said, bristling like a mother goose sensing danger.

All the blood was draining from Esme's head, and she felt a curious airiness in her knees. "I'm going to faint," she whispered.

But there was no time to faint. Lady Bonnington herself was standing in the doorway and surveying the room. Esme forced away her dizziness and stood up. "My lady," she said weakly, "what a pleasure to welcome you to Shantill House."

The marchioness was wearing a carriage costume of straw-colored sarsenet lined in white satin. Her gown was trimmed with black and finished with two of the French ruffs that had just come into fashion. She looked formidable and, to Esme's eyes, utterly terrifying.

"The pleasure is mutual," she said, surveying Esme from head to foot through a pair of pince-nez with an air of vigorous and personal condemnation. That seemed to be the extent of her polite conversation. "Lady Rawlings, I daresay you're within a day or so of giving birth. And yet by all appearances you are hosting a house party. How very peculiar."

"That would be my doing," Arabella drawled, drifting over. "And what a surprise to see you here, Honoratia. My goodness, how long it has been since we were in school together. And yet when I see you, the years melt away!"

"I suppose that's a compliment," Lady Bonnington replied acidly. "One can so rarely tell exactly what you mean, Arabella."

"Such a failing," Esme's aunt replied, smiling. "Whereas one always knows precisely what point you wish to make. So kind of you to clarify your every thought. Now why on earth are you here? Not that

your presence isn't a remarkable pleasure."

Lady Bonnington humphed and banged her stick for emphasis. "I merely wish to speak to your niece for a moment." She gave Esme a pointed glance. "In private, if you would be so kind."

"Of course," Esme said, leading the way to the door. "If you would accompany me to the library?" She desperately wanted to remove Sebastian's mother from the vicinity of her closest friend and aunt, both of whom looked likely to burst from curiosity. It was just her luck that Arabella had been at school with Lady Bonnington. Be brave, she counseled herself, walking into the library.

"You'd best sit down," Lady Bonnington said, waving her stick at the couch. "Good lord, you look as if you're about to birth a water buffalo."

"One assumes not," Esme managed. What an extraordinarily rude old woman. She sat down without waiting for the marchioness to do so.

"I've come for my son," Lady Bonnington said, lowering herself into a chair.

"Am I to assume that you hope to find him here?" Esme said, with an air of disinterest.

"To my vast regret, yes."

"I am sorry to disappoint you. He is not here. To the best of my knowledge, he is on the Continent."

"I have information to the contrary. He told me himself that he was working in a menial capacity in your household. I don't approve, Lady Rawlings. I cannot approve. You may have led a rather imprudent life before this date, but I assure you that this current escapade will result in complete exile from the ton."

"Escapade?" Esme cried. "He took the position without my knowledge. And then he refused to leave!"

"I thought as much," Lady Bonnington said, with an odd tone of satisfaction. "I've been thinking of nothing else for the past few days. It's the blood coming out."

"Indeed? To what blood do you refer, madam?"

"My father's blood. My father was not a man to be crossed. He had a streak of obstinacy that ran a mile wide. I never thought my son had the least touch of him, but I see it now. Of course he won't leave. My father wouldn't have either."

"Be that as it may, your son is no longer in my employ," Esme pointed out.

"He tried to pull the wool over my eyes," Lady Bonnington said. Now her satisfaction was unmistakable. "Gave me fluff and such-and-such about love. I didn't raise him to pay attention to that kind of nonsense. Naturally, I paid that no mind. I stayed up half the night wondering whether he'd gone mad as a March hare due to guilt over killing your husband. But it didn't ring true."

She leaned forward, gray eyes as piercing as an eagle sighting a rabbit. "You're carrying his child, aren't you?"

Esme opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

"Aren't you!" the marchioness thundered, stamping her stick for emphasis.

Esme narrowed her eyes. "No, I am not," she said coolly.

"Poppycrack," Lady Bonnington replied, and there wasn't even a speck of hesitation in her voice. "My son is no fool. The more I thought about it, the more I knew that he would never have entered the wrong bedchamber. He entered yours because you were carrying on an affair with him. Your husband was likely just paying you a courtesy visit. All the world knows they could have found him in Lady Childe's bedchamber, if they wished."

"I am carrying my husband Miles's child!"

"I've no doubt but that you wish you were. I expect we all wish you had kept that bedchamber door a bit more securely fastened."

Flaming circles crept into Esme's cheeks. "I beg your pardon?"

"The important point is that my foolish son has taken the quixotic notion that it's his child about to be born, hasn't he? And he wants to marry you on account of that."

"The child is Miles's, and his birth as a Rawlings is utterly appropriate." Esme's words bristled with rage.

"Think clearly, girl," Lady Bonnington snapped back. "Even if you managed to lure Rawlings into your bed, that child was more than likely fathered by my son. Miles Rawlings was as weak as a cricket; everyone knew that. I expect you know as well as I do that Rawlings's doctor gave him naught more than a few weeks to live. How could he have fathered a child? It takes strong red blood, you know."

"Miles's blood was quite red enough for the task," Esme retorted. "It is unfortunate that Miles died before his son or daughter was born, but this babe will not be the first nor the last posthumous child. May I remind you, Lady Bonnington, that for Miles's child to be born a Bonnington would be just as much an affront to Miles's name?"

"So you admit that the child could be my grandchild," the marchioness said with grim satisfaction.

Esme opened her mouth to reply, but Lady Bonnington thumped her stick.

"In my day, we didn't spend as much time as your generation does worrying about whose bedroom door was open. I'll put my cards on the table. I would greatly dislike my son to marry a woman with your reputation. And I want my son out of the woodshed, or wherever he is, and back in the drawing room where he belongs." She pursed her lips. "Surely I need not articulate my position further?"

Esme felt as if rage were bursting under her skin. "Your son is not here," she said, punctuating each word with deliberation. "I sent him away. This is my husband's child, and under no circumstances would I marry your son. You do realize, don't you, that Marquess Bonnington is responsible for taking my husband's life?"

"You know as well as I do that Rawlings could have popped off at any time."

But Esme could see just the faintest hesitation in her face. "If your son hadn't entered my bedchamber uninvited and grappled with Miles in the dark, my husband might still be alive," she said flatly. "I cannot marry a man under those circumstances. I could never make that man into my child's father."

"It always surprises me that the most flamboyant hussies are the most missish at the core," Lady Bonnington observed. The whole encounter didn't seem to have ruffled her sensibilities at all. "Mind you, your own mother is one of the most punctilious women in the ton ." She stood up, leaning heavily on her stick. "But it's all well and good that

you refuse to marry him, no matter your reasons. My only remaining concern is the parentage of that child. Don't underestimate my son, Lady Rawlings. If he feels the child is his, he'll likely take you to Gretna Green without permission or delay. It's my father's blood coming out."

"I won't marry him," Esme said. "Neither in Gretna Green nor in St. Paul's Cathedral. And may I point out again: he did leave my estate, Lady Bonnington. He shows rather less resolution than you give him credit for."

"Miss him, do you?" Lady Bonnington asked.

Esme colored. She was hideously observant, this awful old woman. "Not at all!"

"In his absence, I shall remain until the birth and ascertain whether the child is indeed a member of my family," the marchioness said. "If the child is Rawlings's, this whole debacle will be quickly forgotten by all of us."

"How on earth are you going to know that? Newborn children look remarkably similar, you know," Esme said, nettled beyond all patience. "From what I've been told, they're all equally red and wrinkled."

"If he's a Bonnington, he'll have a spangled mark at the base of his spine."

"No!" Esme gasped. Sebastian did have a small brown mark at the base of his spine.

Lady Bonnington gave a little cackle of laughter. "Don't be a fool! My son has a blemish, but it's his alone. What do you think this is, a fairy story? I'll look at the child and see whether it resembles our side of the family or your husband's. And then I will inform my son of my observations. Since you do not wish to marry him, you might hope for red hair. We have no redheads in our family."

She stumped to the door and then turned. "You're not the daughter-in-law I would have chosen, as I think I've made clear."

"The feeling is mutual," Esme said with scathing precision. "I would prefer that you put the notion from your mind immediately."

"But you're surprisingly acceptable," the marchioness said, not heeding

Esme at all. "Mind you, you're related to Arabella Withers, and she and I have been at loggerheads since we were at school together. And that was a donkey's age ago, for all she tries to act as if she's got no more than thirty years to her. You may have the reputation of a coal scuttle, but you seem to have some backbone too."

Esme literally saw red. She dropped into a faint excuse for a curtsy. "If you'll forgive me, I shall retire to my room in order to recover from that compliment. I can occupy myself by praying for red hair."

The corners of Lady Bonnington's mouth curled upwards. "I am rather reminded of myself, as a matter of fact."

And that comment, as Esme later thought to herself, was the crudest stroke of all.

Chapter 17

Playing at Billiards

There are certain times in a man's life when the only thing he wants is the company of other men. After a dinner marked by an incomprehensible female subtext and a ballet of barbed comments, Stephen wanted nothing more than an evening of hard drinking, cards, and bawdy jokes. Alas, the sole male in the household other than himself, Winnamore, rambled off to his bed directly after the meal. Still, there were two places in the house likely free from women: Stephen's own bedroom and the billiards room.

But when he pulled open the door to the billiards room, he saw a trim little bottom lean over the woolen cloth covering the table as Beatrix Lennox stretched to make a shot. Stephen decided on the spot that perhaps one female was acceptable company.

"Good evening, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy," she said, glancing over her shoulder as the shot caromed one of the red balls off two walls and directly into a pocket.

He paused as if transfixed. The oil lamps suspended above the table turned her hair into a flaming gold. She straightened with exquisite grace and deliberation, as if she were conscious of precisely what that

little movement had done to his loins.

"Do you play billiards?" she asked, pulling balls from the corner pockets.

Stephen nodded. Blood seemed to be thundering through his body, every beat speaking to the sultry rhythm of her body.

She pulled the fifteen balls together. "Pyramids?"

He nodded. "Where did you learn to play?" Stephen said, walking over to pick up a cue stick and trying to appear utterly natural.

Bea shrugged. "I found one of the footmen secretly playing on our billiards table when I was no more than twelve. He would have been instantly dismissed had anyone found out. I'm afraid that I coerced him into giving me lessons."

"Do take the first turn," Stephen said, wanting her to bend over again.

She looked at him, and there was a little smile playing around her mouth that made his face burn. Then she slowly, slowly bent over the table. She was wearing an evening dress so slim that it reminded him of a chemise. It was a faint pink that should have looked awful with her hair but didn't. Around it billowed an overdress of transparent washed silk, embroidered with fleur-de-lis. All that transparent cloth emphasized the trim curves of her body every time she moved.

She broke the triangle, and balls scattered in all directions like drops of water falling on a plate. Three caromed into corner pockets.

Stephen looked at the table. "That footman must have been a remarkable player."

"Why do you say so?" she asked.

"Because you are obviously an excellent player," he said, trying to decide which ball to take down.

"The implication is that a woman can only reflect the skill of her teacher. As it happens, Ned was a mediocre player. I could beat him within four months."

"There," Stephen said, indicating the far right pocket.

He bent down and chose a ball. With casual precision he sent the ball on a voyage from one side to the other, into a collision with another

ball, and finally into the pocket he designated.

"You would seem to be a much more formidable opponent than my footman," Bea observed.

He straightened. "I apologize for the inference regarding female skill. You are, as a matter of fact, the first female player I have encountered."

She shrugged, and a few of the loose red curls that tumbled down her back fell forward onto her creamy shoulder. "I might point out that it is difficult for women to demonstrate a skill that no one offers to teach them. I'll take that ball" She whipped the ball off another ball and into a corner, sending it directly into its pocket.

"Le coup sec," Stephen said, admiration leaking into his tone. He walked over to stand just next to her. Her French perfume reached him, a promise, a smoky promise of reckless sensuality.

Bea smiled at him over her shoulder, and he wanted to bend her backwards on the table. Push the balls to the side and take her there. Anywhere.

"I thought I'd take that ball," he said, pointing. His voice was a husky question.

She moved slightly to the side and then peered down at the ball. "Were you planning a low stroke?"

He nodded. He had just noticed that for all her calm, there was a pulse beating madly in her throat. In her beautiful creamy throat that he longed to lap, to kiss, to taste. "If I may," he said, and even to his ears, his voice was deeper, slower, lazy. He put a hand to her back and moved her oh so slightly to the side. Then he bent over, just as slowly and deliberately as she had. He could feel her eyes on his body, on his legs.

He straightened. "This is a difficult shot," he said, looking down at her. There was a faint, faint crimson stain in her cheeks that didn't owe its color to art. "I'll remove my jacket, if it wouldn't offend you, Lady Beatrix."

"Bea," she said. "Please call me Bea."

She watched as he wrenched the jacket from his shoulders and rolled up his sleeves. He knew he had a muscled body, a body a woman

would admire, even a woman who had presumably enjoyed more than a few male bodies. The only way he could dispel the tension of hours spent in Parliament was to visit Gentleman Jackson's boxing salon. He'd never resorted to deliberately exhibiting it before, but for Bea

He bent over again, lining up the shot with elaborate care, his hip nearly touching hers. By some miracle his fingers were steady. The shot went into a gentle reverse spin, glanced at another ball, danced by a third, spun sedately into the designated pocket.

"Your turn," he said, straightening.

"Hmmm. You do have skill."

He threw caution to the winds and let a reckless grin spread across his face. "In many areas, Lady Bea."

"Just Bea," she said. But there was a sparkle to her eyes.

She walked away from him, and it took all his strength not to pull her back to his side. "I believe that I shall take that ball." Her lips pursed. It was torture. Would she? How experienced was she? Would she do things that ladies never did? Already she had kissed him like a wanton. Would she? Images danced through his mind, tormenting him.

She was on the opposite side of the table now. She bent down, focusing on her stick, and Stephen could see directly inside her bodice. Her gown was low, and her breasts were cradled against the hard pad lining the table, resting as they might in the palm of his hand.

Stephen made a hoarse sound in his throat, and she glanced up for a moment. Her cheeks were flaming now. But, "I shall try a jenny in the middle pocket," she said.

"You could better your grip," Stephen said, just as she was lengthening her arm to take a shot.

She straightened, and he saw amusement in her eyes. "And I gather you know a better posture?"

"A better grip," he corrected.

She looked at him through her lashes, a smile playing on her lips. "Mr. Fairfax-Lacy, naturally I would be quite pleased to learn a new grip. I'm not a woman who chooses ignorance over knowledge. But I must

point out to you that you presumably have a busy night before you."

He raised his eyebrows. Something about her, about the way she looked at him, made him feel recklessly gorgeous, decadent, lustful, wild all the things that a thoughtful man of words never felt. "I would never be too busy for you," he said. "And my name is Stephen."

She perched a rounded hip on the edge of the table. Stephen watched her, feeling another surge of animal lust. He felt in his skin, in his body, in a way he hadn't since he was a restless, lustful adolescent. He put down his stick deliberately, and then stretched, letting his chest draw the fine linen of his shirt tight against his chest muscles.

Her eyes darkened. "Alas, I would guess that the duties of a man with a brand-new mistress leave no time for lessons."

"I can be the judge of that," he said easily, coming around the table to her. He felt like a tiger, stalking his prey. She stood absolutely still and let him come up to her. So he moved to stand behind her, just as if they were about to make love, as if he were going to bend her over the billiards table. Then he brought her body into the curve of his, tucking her sweet little bottom against his groin, and leaned down.

"If you straightened your right shoulder, your aim would improve." It was quite a triumph that his voice sounded much as usual. He tucked her fingers back against her stick.

But Bea was no tender lamb, to be driven by a tiger. She slowly straightened, and his body moved with her. Then she turned within the circle of his arms, reaching back and bracing herself on the table.

"Mr. Fairfax-Lacy," she said softly, "I assume that's not your pool cue at my backside? What precisely are you playing?"

He didn't look a proper Englishman now. There was an open male swagger about him, a masculine vigor that she had never seen before.

"Seducing you."

"And if I don't choose to be seduced?"

"Don't you?" He bent his head and brushed her lips. "Don't you, Bea? Because I thought you told me that you were seduceable."

"I don't invite married men into my bed," Bea said gently, but there was steel in her voice.

"But I'm not married!"

She shrugged. "You are Helene's. I do not betray other women."

Stephen picked her up and seated her on the horsehair pad lining the pool table. Her lips were pale cherry again. The color had worn off. As soon as she allowed him, he would run his tongue along her mouth, bite her round lower lip. "As of yet, I belong to no woman," he drawled. Then he lowered his head, finally, finally, burying his mouth against her, raking his lips against her rosy mouth.

For a second she relaxed against him and her mouth opened slightly, just barely yielding to his hunger. And then she pushed him away with all the determination of a pure-as-the-driven-snow duke's daughter.

"Behave yourself!"

"Bea," he said, and the word had all the hunger he felt in it. "Loyalty in matters of marriage is an entirely commendable emotion. But Helene and I have taken no vows. We are merely friends !" He looked directly at her. Her eyes were a warm brown, with just the faintest tinge of exotic green, just enough to make them tempting beyond all resistance.

"Friends?" There was an edge to her voice. "You offer euphemisms with practiced ease, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy."

"I am a politician," he said with a sardonic grin.

"I thought you didn't care to take mistresses from women with experience. Too much experience," she clarified.

He looked at her, cursing his own stupidity. "That was cruel, and rather shabby," he said, echoing her own comment. "My excuse is that I want you so much that I"

"I'll take it into consideration," she said, standing up.

Longing spread through him, coursed down his legs and made him tremble from head to foot. Dimly, he wondered what in the hell was happening to him. Why would this woman—this small, impudent, less-than-chaste woman—drive him into a fever of lust?

"We haven't finished our game," he said hoarsely.

She grinned at that, and the way her rosy lips curled sent his heart dancing. She had a way of smiling that made it look as if her whole body was dancing with joy. "There's no need to finish." She nodded toward the table. "You cannot win after my last shot."

He jerked her against his chest and swallowed her laughter, taking her mouth again and again, driving his tongue in a rhythm his whole body longed to repeat. "You," he said hoarsely, "I want you, Bea."

Her eyes slowly opened, and now they had that slumbrous interest he remembered. She melted against him and silenced him with her mouth, with a trembling sweetness, a speaking silence.

"Might I seduce you with poetry? I gather it is a method that you recommend." His voice was dark and slow, and his hands ran down her back with unsteady promise. She looked at him, and her eyes seemed more green than brown now, all exotic beauty and one dimple. But there was something in her face She had expected him to react this way. What he glimpsed now was not an aching lust akin to his but the faintest hint of satisfaction.

Men no doubt wooed Lady Beatrix all the time. Her beauty and her reputation would bring them like moths to a flame. She dressed to please, to attract; she made up her face so that she looked even more exotic and approachable. She dared them all to come to her, and Stephen had no doubt but that they came.

Yet he sensed that Bea didn't succumb herself. She found pleasure, but not delirium. He wanted to bring her delirium, or nothing. "On second thought, perhaps I won't seduce you after all," he said, dropping his arms from about her and rolling down one sleeve. He watched her through her lashes.

She looked surprised but not particularly heartbroken.

"I shall wait for you to woo me . After all, I shall be quite busy in the next few days, as you kindly pointed out."

"I don't woo," Bea said, her small nose in the air.

He leaned back against the billiard table and looked at her. He had never, ever, felt as if his body were so valuable. Deliberately he spread his legs and watched her glance catch for a second and then fly away. "Did you never see a man whom you wanted rather desperately?"

"I have been fortunate in that" and she stopped. Clearly something or

someone had occurred to her.

He let his eyes glide over her breasts, linger where she was most sensitive. "It will depend, of course, on whether you think that I am worth competing for."

A corner of her mouth turned up wryly. She was no green girl to be brought directly to heel, that was clear. "I shall have to consider the matter," she said gravely. "You see, I am not altogether certain why Helene desired to summon you to her side. You, a sober party official, seem an unusual choice."

"Can you think of nothing?" The question hung in the air between them.

"I suppose there's your voice," she said.

Mentally, Stephen cheered. She liked his voice! He walked over to her, and his words came out in the dark, liquid language he had used to convince reluctant politicians but never a woman before. "I shall have to hope that this voice is potent enough so that you enter the fray."

She stared at him, eyes dark. He tipped up her chin and saw in her eyes the expectation of a kiss. So he bent and kissed her hand instead. "Lady Bea," he said. "I wish you good night."

She was surprised, he could see that. He doubted any man had ever left her company without begging for greater liberties. He hooked his coat with a finger and slung it over his shoulder. Then he walked to the door, feeling his body in an unfamiliar masculine swagger, in a walk so unlike him that he almost laughed.

"Stephen?" Her voice was so soft that it was no more than a whisper in the night air.

But of course he stopped. Whether she knew it or not, she was a siren, and he would follow her anywhere.

"Are you certain you're worth it? Two women vying for your attentions?"

His smile was as proud as a sultan's. "I've no doubt of that, Bea. To my mind, the only real question is which of you will win me?"

She shrugged. "Not me. I don't woo."

"A pity, that," he said, and turned on his heel to go.

Bea stared at the closed door in blank astonishment. No man since Ned had ever walked away from her. In fact, she saw her role in society as a fairly simple one. She adorned herself; they came.

He was infuriating, if intriguing. But she'd be damned before she would chase a man, she who already had the reputation of a demimonde. That was one thing that was quite clear in her mind. She might have taken lovers—although far fewer than Stephen appeared to believebut she had never, since Ned, allowed one of those men to believe that she was desperate for their company. Because she never was. She enjoyed male company. That was all.

And if Mr. Fairfax-Lacy wanted some sort of vulgar exhibition of interest, he was bound to be disappointed.

Chapter 18

In Which Curiosity Runs Rampant

Rees Holland, Ear! Godwin, was in a pissor of a mood, as his butler put it belowstairs. "Got some sort of note from his wife, he did," Leke confirmed.

Rosy, the downstairs maid and Leke's niece, gasped. "I saw a pantomime on my last half-day where the husband poisoned a love letter and when his wife kissed it, she died. Maybe the countess saw the pantomime as well and she's poisoned him!"

"He deserves it then," grunted Leke. He found Earl Godwin difficult to work for, and he didn't like the irregularity of the household. On the one hand, his master was an earl, and that was good. On the other hand, the man had a dastardly temper, not to mention the fact that his fancy piece was living in the countess's quarters.

"And there's something to clean up there as well, so you'd better get to it."

"Don't tell me he spilled coffee on all them papers again," Rosy said, scowling. "I'm finding another position if he doesn't pick up those

papers. How can I clean with that much muck about my ankles?"

"Don't you touch his papers," Leke said. "It's worth your life. Anyhow, it's not coffee this time. 'Twas a vase of flowers the strumpet was foolish enough to put on his piano."

"It's a wicked temper he has," Rosy said with relish. "How the strumpet puts up with it, I don't know."

The strumpet was Alina McKenna, erstwhile opera singer and innamorata of the bad-tempered earl. The term strumpet wasn't truly pejorative; both Leke and his niece rather liked Lina, as she called herself. Not that one could truly like a woman of that type, of course. But she wasn't as hard to work for as a great many more virtuous ladies, and Leke in particular knew that well enough.

He shrugged. "Thank the Lord, the master's taken himself off, at least."

"Where'd he go?"

"How could I know? Something in response to that letter from his wife, I've no doubt. Time for you to go about your duties, Rosy, before the strumpet makes her way home." The only reason Rosy's mum allowed her to work in such a house of ill repute was due to her uncle's presence. He took his responsibilities seriously and did his best to arrange her duties so that she rarely encountered one of the inhabitants of the house.

"I'd best go clean the sitting room then," Rosy said. It was a rare moment when the master wasn't in there pounding on one of them three pianos he had. And now there was likely water all over the floor.

A moment later she flew back downstairs, finding her uncle polishing silver. "I found the note," she said. "The note from his wife. He'd crumpled it up and left it right there, on the piano." She stuck out her hand.

Leke hesitated.

"Go on, Uncle John! You've simply got to read it you know you do!"

"I oughtn't to."

"Mum will just murder you if you don't," Rosy said with relish. And that was true enough. Rosy's poor mum, Leke's only sister, was stuck in the house caring for Rosy's little sisters. She lived for stories about

the goings-on at the earl's house that Leke and Rosy brought from the great house. That and the discarded gossip papers that the strumpet read and threw to the side.

Leke pursed his lips to indicate disapproval and then flattened the piece of paper. "It's from the countess all right," he confirmed. "Looks like she's staying in Wiltshire somewhere." He peered at the direction. "Can't really make it out. Perhaps Shambly House? That can't be right."

"Never mind where she is!" Rosy said, dancing with impatience. "What did she say? Where's he gone to, then?"

"'Rees,'" Leke read, "'I've contracted pleurisy. If you wish to see me alive, please come at your earliest convenience.'" "

Rosy gasped. "No!"

Leke was reading it again. "That's what it says, all right. I'm thinking it's a bit oddwhat is pleurisy, anyhow?"

"Likely some awful, awful disease," Rosy said, clasping her hands. "Oh, the poor countess! I only hope she's not deformed by it."

"You've never met her. Are you crying?"

For Rosy was wiping away tears. "It's just so sad! Here she's probably been pining away for her husband, and longing for him to come back to her, and now it's too, too late!"

"Use your head, girl. If you were the earl's wife, would you be pining for him to return?"

Rosy hesitated. "He's very handsome."

Her uncle snorted. "Like a wild boar is handsome, maybe. Face facts, Rosy. You wouldn't like to be married to the man, would you?"

"Well, of course not! He's awfully old, and so messy, too."

"The countess was better off without him. Funny, though, about that pleurisy. Pleurisy. What is pleurisy?"

"Mum would know," Rosy said.

"Neither of us has a half-day for another fortnight," her uncle said dismissively.

"But you could go over this afternoon, Uncle," Rosy pleaded. "You know you could. The master's gone to Wiltshire, to his wife's deathbed!" Her eyes were huge with excitement.

Leke hesitated and looked at the paper.

"That's our own mistress dying. We must needs know why. What if people ask?"

"I don't see what difference it makes. If she dies, the only thing we need are blacks. That is, if the master even sees fit to go into blacks for her death. Mayhap he and the strumpet will carry on just as usual."

"Oh no, they wouldn't!" Rosy clasped her hands again. "Perhaps this will be enough to reform him. He'll"

"You're dreaming, lass. Now up you go to the sitting room, and I'll see how I do with the polishing. If I can finish this lot, I'll nip over to your mother's."

It wasn't until that evening that Rosy and her uncle met up again. Theirs was a small household, due to a combination of the earl's unconventional habits and the reluctance of decent servants to stay in a house of iniquity. Supper in the servants' dining room was merely Cook, Rosy, Uncle, and three footmen, not one of whom was quite as intelligent as he might have been. The scullery girl and shoeblack ate in the kitchen.

Rosy had filled Cook in on all the details of the afternoon before Leke made his way to the head of the table.

Rosy waited while he said a brief grace, and then burst out, "What is it, Uncle? What is pleurisy? Did Mum know?"

"Your mum is a keen woman," Leke said, taking some roast beef from the plate handed him by James, the third footman. "Tuck your hand under the plate, James. You don't want us to have to stare at your fingers, do you? Put us right off our food, it would."

James curled his fingers under the plate, and Leke nodded at him.

"She did know what pleurisy was, and that's a fact."

"I thought pleurisy was some sort of thing children caught," Cook said. Cook was a sturdy woman with bright red cheeks and a generous smile who had once cooked for the Prince of Wales and never forgot

it. She was a genius in the kitchen, or so the prince had said. Earl Godwin had to pay her one hundred guineas a year to keep her in his house.

"That's right," Leke said, nodding. "You're another shrewd one, just like Rosy's mum. It's a disease children catch. In fact, my sister had never heard of an adult with it."

"But the countess isn't a child," Rosy said, perplexed.

"I do know someone who caught measles and it killed him," Cook said. "Mr. Leke, what do you think of this lamb pie?" Frustrated by the complete lack of visitors to the house, Cook had taken to serving up dishes for the staff as if Prinny himself were expected to sit down with them. "Have to keep my hand in, don't I?" or so she justified it. And it wasn't as if the master noticed anything wrong with the household bills. Rich as Croesus, he was.

"I'm liking it," Leke said, chewing with proper gravity. "There's just a touch of allspice, is it?"

"Correct," said the Cook. "I like a man with a knowing mouth, that I do." She beamed at him and then turned to Rosy. "People die in the strangest ways. There's no telling what might happen to a soul. Why, I just heard the other day that a man was riding his horse across the moors, right in the daylight, mind, and"

Chapter 19

Yours to Woo

It took two days two whole days for Esme's heart to form a hard little shell that stopped her from thinking about the marquess. He was gone. That story was finished. True, his mother was still in the house, sparring with Arabella and occasionally flinging an insult at Esme, but her presence was irrelevant. Sebastian was gone, as Miles had gone, and as men always went. She decided to stop thinking about him. Forever. Of course, that didn't stop her from waking at the first light of dawn and brooding. It's a very good thing that Sebastian took himself off to France, Esme told herself, because I was in danger of believing his protestations and vows of love. More fool I. He didn't

love me enough to defy me when I told him to leave. He just left. Probably thinking she'd be waiting when he returned from a leisurely exploration of French vineyards.

Why on earth cry for such a man? A potent, useful rage was filling the empty spaces in her heart. It was his fault that she was forced to entertain his mother. And it was his fault that she was carrying an elephantine child (never mind the irrationality of that). And it was his fault that she was husbandless and in the awkward position of not knowing who'd fathered her own child.

All together, her situation was all his fault, and the only pity was that he was no longer there so she could blister his ears with the truth of it. And if Sebastian were standing in my bedroom at this very moment, Esme thought, I would tell him that his attempt to imprint himself on my skin didn't work. That the only result of his exertions was an aching back and a desire to never see him again. She set her jaw to stop hot tears from running down her cheeks.

Of course, if his memories of that night were anything like hers, Sebastian might have trouble believing her. The solution would be to flirt madly in front of him. Perhaps do more than flirt. Why should he think as he clearly did—that she was some sort of light-skirt who would allow him to waltz in and out of her bedchamber at will? Marriage would be the perfect solution. Especially if she married long before he wandered back from France and thought to pick up where he left off.

Perhaps she would marry Fairfax-Lacy, since her aunt had been kind enough to bring him to the house for precisely that purpose. Helene wasn't acting at all loverlike toward Fairfax-Lacy, and Esme had seen enough surreptitious lovers to recognize the signs. Or the lack thereof. So there was nothing nothing !to prevent her from taking such an eligible husband. Moreover, her mother would appreciate her marriage. Esme suspected that the only way on earth Fanny would receive her in public again would be if Esme remarried a man of the highest character. Sebastian certainly wasn't in that category. Not that she ever considered marrying him.

Fairfax-Lacy had a reputation for high moral fibre. And he was handsome too, in a sort of well-bred fashion. He didn't have Sebastian's raw beauty. But Fairfax-Lacy would make a perfect husband. A perfect, respectable husband whom her mother would adore . He would never leave her on the verge of giving birth.

That was the crux of it: Sebastian didn't seem to realize how frightening it was to give birth. He just didn't care enough to be frightened for her. Esme cried over that for a while and then, infuriatingly, found herself crying over her mother's similar lack of concern. Nobody cares, Esme thought savagely, conveniently forgetting Arabella and Helene. Not Sebastian, not Miles, not her own mother.

She didn't make it downstairs for luncheon, having dissolved into a humiliating, childish pit of despair. But by late afternoon, the hard little shell was back in place. Of course she wouldn't die in childbirth. She would be just fine. There was nothing she could do about the fact that Sebastian didn't love her as much as she wished. Better to forget it, push that fact away, not think about it. She rang her bell and asked Jeannie to prepare yet another cucumber poultice for her eyes.

By the time Esme descended the stairs in the evening, she had managed to channel an ocean's worth of rage and grief into one question: was Stephen Fairfax-Lacy indeed appropriate husband material? She didn't think he had Sebastian's ability to overlook her belly. He was unlikely to be attracted to her in her condition. But she could certainly make up her mind whether he was suitable for a life's worth of dinner conversations.

And so it was that Stephen Fairfax-Lacy, who strode into the dining room hoping against all hopes that a certain lady had decided to woo him, found, to his utter surprise, that his hostess appeared to have made that decision instead. And Lady Rawlings, nine months with child or not, was a formidable wooer.

Naturally, she was seated at the head of the table, but she placed him to her right. And Stephen had no sooner seated himself than Lady Rawlings leaned toward him with a very marked kind of attention. There was a sleepy smile in her eyes that would make any man under the age of seventy think of bednay, dream of bed. Yet it wasn't until Lady Beatrix Lennox was ushered into a seat across from him that Stephen began enjoying himself. As Bea sat down, Esme as she'd asked him to call her was showing him the intricate figures on the back of her fan. And he glimpsed something in Bea's face. Just enough to make him draw closer to Esme and bend his head over her fan.

He was, after all, an old hand at campaigning.

"Romeo and Juliet, are they?" he asked Esme, peering at the little figures painted with exquisite detail on the folds of her fan.

"Exactly. You see"one of Esme's curls brushed his cheek"there's Romeo below the balcony, looking up at Juliet. Bea, would you like to see it? The workmanship is quite elegant."

The Marchioness Bonnington was sitting at Stephen's right. "Goodness, what a hen party!" she said briskly. "Why on earth didn't Arabella even out the numbers when she issued her invitations?"

Esme looked up, and her tone evened to a polite disinterest. "I can't say. Lady Bonnington. I believe that Earl Godwin will arrive tomorrow. His presence should ameliorate the situation."

"Humph," Lady Bonnington said. "Least said of that reprobate, the better. So what's on that fan you are regarding so closely, Lady Beatrix?"

Bea blinked down at the fan. "Romeo and Juliet," she murmured. There was something odd happening here. She glanced across the table while pretending to examine the fan. Esme's impending child was hidden beneath the tablecloth, which meant that she looked like any other gloriously beautiful woman in Londonexcept there were very few women who could match Esme. And to all appearances Esme had decided to seduce Stephen Fairfax-Lacy. Her Stephen. In fact, Esme presumably had decided to follow her aunt's advice and marry , not seduce, Stephen. Of course she wasn't thinking of seduction, given her delicate condition.

The realization gave Bea a most peculiar sinking feeling. Esme's hair was caught up in a loose topknot; fat, silky curls caressed her shoulders and cheeks. She wore a gown of French violet silk cut very low in the bosom and very short in the sleeves. But more importantly, she was burning with a kind of incandescent sensual beauty.

"Romeo and Juliet, did you say?" Lady Bonnington barked.

"The balcony scene," Bea explained, pulling herself together and handing over the fan. She didn't want to woo Stephen. Therefore, it hardly mattered if Esme decided to do so. "I've always thought it was an absurd scene."

"How so?" Stephen asked, one dark eyebrow raised.

Bea blinked, trying to see what it was about the man that drove all the women in his vicinity to hanker after him. He was handsome, but she'd seen better. Somewhere. He was waiting for a reply, so she shrugged. "Romeo stands below, wailing up at Juliet like a pining

adolescent."

"That seems a bit harsh. He is in love."

"He only met the woman twenty minutes earlier. But you're right, he thinks he's in love. The funny part, to my mind, is when Juliet suddenly says: do you plan to marry me, and if so, where?"

Esme grinned. "How extraordinary. I read the play, of course, but I never realized that Juliet proposed to him."

" ' If that thy bent of love be honorable , " Bea quoted, " ' thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow . ' Juliet bluntly asks him to marry her, although he hasn't said a word on the subject previously."

Esme's eyes flicked to Stephen with a meaningful laughter that made Bea's stomach twist. She was so beautiful! It was almost too much to bear. Bea could paint her cheeks the color of the rainbow, but she could never reproduce that flair of raw sensuality that Esme had just tossed in Stephen's direction.

"I saw a hilarious parody of the balcony scene once," Esme was saying, her voice a glorious, husky alto.

"Oh?" Stephen bent toward her, his eyes bold and appreciative.

Naturally, Bea thought. Given the pick of the three women in the house, Helene, herself and Esme, what man wouldn't choose Esme?

"This Juliet almost threw herself off the balcony in her eagerness to join Romeo," Esme remarked. Her eyes seemed to be speaking volumes. Bea considered pleading a sick stomach and leaving the table.

The Marchioness Bonnington had been examining the painted fan; she put it down with a little rap. "That sounds very unlike Shakespeare."

"Do share it with us," Stephen said.

If he got any closer to her shoulder, he could start chewing on her curls, Bea thought. Just like the goat.

"I only remember a line or two," Esme said, and her crimson lips curled into a private smile for Stephen, so seductively potent that Bea felt it like a blow.

"Romeo stands below the balcony, bellowing at Juliet," Esme

continued. "And she says 'Who's there?'"

Stephen had just caught a tantalizing glimpse of Bea's eyes. She looked pained. Stricken? That was too strong. He deliberately returned Esme's smoldering gaze with one of his own. "And what does Romeo reply?" He pitched his voice to a deep purr.

Esme flashed a smile around the table. "I do hope this won't embarrass any of you."

"I doubt it," Lady Bonnington said sourly. "After the astonishments of the last month, I consider myself fairly unshockable."

"The scene takes place in the early morning, if you remember. Juliet says, 'Who, Romeo? O, you're an early cock in truth! Who would have thought you to be so rare a stirrer?'" Esme said it with dulcet satisfaction.

There was a moment of silence and then Stephen roared with laughter. "I'll warrant you Romeo clambered up the vine as fast as he was able!"

"She wouldn't allow him to do so," Esme said. Her eyes were sparkling with mischief, and she had a slim hand on Stephen's arm. "The next line was something like this: 'Nay, by my faith, I'll keep you down, for you knights are very dangerous if once you get above.'"

Stephen laughed again, and then tilted his head toward Esme and murmured something in her ear. Obviously, it was a comment meant for her alone. Likely something about getting above. Bea chewed very precisely and swallowed her beef. Perhaps Arabella would allow her to return to London on the morrow. It wasn't that she was jealous, because she wasn't. It was just that no man could resist Esme, and certainly not Stephen, who had frankly told her that he hoped to marry. Slope was bending down at Esme's shoulder, interrupting her tête-à-tête with Stephen. Bea looked back at her beef. She liked Esme. She really did.

"My lady," Slope said quietly into Esme's ear. "We have an unexpected guest."

"All right," Esme said, only half listening. She'd forgotten how much fun flirting was. She was actually enjoying herself. She hadn't thought about wretched, wretched Sebastian for at least a half hour. Arabella was right. Stephen Fairfax-Lacy was charming, and he had a ready wit. He was fairly handsome. She had almost decided to marry him.

Of course, first she had to make certain that Helene didn't want him for herself.

Slope, seeing that the unexpected guest in question had followed him into the dining room, although his mistress hadn't yet noticed, straightened and announced. "The Marquess Bonnington."

Esme's head jerked up. There he was.

No gardener ever wore a pearl gray coat of the finest broadcloth, with an elaborately tied cravat of a pale, icy blue. He looked every inch a nobleman, from the top of his elegantly tousled hair to the tips of his shining Hessians.

There were murmurs all down the table. The scandalous marquess had returned from the Continent! Or from the garden, if only they'd known.

She met his eyes, and there was a flare of amusement in them that made her smoldering rage burst into flame. No doubt he thought to simply return to her bedchamber. Without giving a thought for her reputation, for her child's reputation, for her future.

"Ah, Bonnington," his mother said. "There you are." She sounded as if he'd been to a horse race rather than exiled to the Continent.

But he waited, as polite as ever, for his hostess's acknowledgement. Esme's hands clenched into fists. How dare he think he could simply come and go in her house, just as he had walked into her bedchamber at Lady Troubridge's house?

"Lord Bonnington," she said, inclining her head. "How can it be anything other than a pleasure to see you, after so many months." She reached over and put a hand on Stephen Fairfax-Lacy's shoulder. He had broad shoulders. She was almost certain that he would be as good a lover as Sebastian. He certainly would be less exhausting.

Fairfax-Lacy looked up, and Esme smiled down at him brilliantly. "Marquess Bonnington has joined us just at the very moment I was to make an important announcement. May I introduce my fiance, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy?"

There was a moment of utter silence in the dining room.

Then Sebastian went into a low bow, the kind with a flourish and a good deal of gloved violence. His eyes were pitch black in the

candlelight, but Esme wouldn't have been surprised if they'd burned straight through her. "I seem to have arrived just in time for a celebration," he said, and the sardonic note in his voice was clear for all to hear.

Esme swallowed and tightened her hand on her new fiance's shoulder. She had always been impetuous, but this was without a doubt her wildest moment yet.

"What a delightful surprise!" the Marchioness Bonnington crowed. Obviously, she saw her son's freedom within reach.

"Yes, indeed," Helene chimed in, giving Esme a darkling look that said, clear as day: I have use for that man, remember ?

Even little Bea seemed shaken, although she said nothing. And to Esme's endless relief, her brand-new fiancé also refrained from expressing his surprise.

Chapter 20

"You needn't really marry me. After all, it's not as if you asked me."

"My thought precisely."

"In fact, no one need even know that we were engaged"

"We are not engaged!"

"Would you mind terribly if we just pretended that we are?"

Stephen Fairfax-Lacy was perplexed. Even after some twenty years of being an eligible bachelor, he seemed to have reached an unexpected peak of desirability. "Lady Rawlings"

"Oh, please, you must call me Esme! After all, we're"

"Engaged," he put in. He couldn't help smiling a little. "In that case, you must call me Stephen."

"Thank you," Esme said, with evident relief.

"But I insist, Esme, that you tell me why we are engaged."

Esme fidgeted and rearranged her fingers. Stephen had seen that look before, many times. It was the look that a Member of Parliament wore who had been courted away by the other party, who had to disclose that he'd already given a crucial vote away.

"Esme?"

"Perhaps you are aware that Marquess Bonnington and Iuh" She looked agonized, so Stephen came to her rescue.

"Of course, I am aware that you had an unpleasant experience at Lady Troubridge's house party last year, during which your husband unfortunately suffered a spasm and died."

Esme nodded. "You put it remarkably concisely."

Stephen waited. Esme looked at him and then away again. "I was having an affair with him. With the marquess," she clarified.

Stephen thought for a second. "In that case, I believe I understand why

the marquess has returned from the Continent. He has just discovered that you are carrying a child?"

"He wishes to compensate for what happened last summer. Marquess Bonnington believes that marrying me will ameliorate his guilt."

"Guilt is an interesting concept," Stephen said. "I wish I could induce guilt in more of the men I deal with on a regular basis."

"But I don't wish to marry a man who seeks to assuage his guilt. And when I saw him, I panicked."

Stephen was beginning to enjoy himself. While he had never begged for any woman's attentions, they had never stood in line and begged for his either. "I gather I appeared to be a useful solution to your problem?" he suggested.

"I'm truly sorry to have used you so. But would you greatly dislike pretending to be my fiancé, merely until Marquess Bonnington returns to the Continent? I'm certain we can arrange it so that no one outside this small party discovers our brief engagement. His mother is, naturally enough, anxious to turn his thoughts in another direction; perhaps she will manage to convince him to leave by tomorrow morning. He need feel no further guilt when he thinks I am marrying such an estimable man as yourself."

"I bow to your greater knowledge of Marquess Bonnington. I must say that I would not have judged him as one to easily give up. I would describe him along the lines of a terrier with a bone."

"I don't want to be that bone," Esme said despairingly. "I know I'm not looking my best, and I'm not a very appealing fiancée under the circumstances, but if you would play a devoted future spouse in front of the marquess, I would be endlessly grateful."

His laughter echoed around the room. Stephen stood up and kissed Esme's hand, and then helped her to her feet. "Since you are my future wife, perhaps I could take the liberty of telling you that you look exhausted. May I escort you upstairs?"

"Oh, thank you!" Esme said, taking his arm. They encountered no one, and Stephen saw his presumed wife into her chamber with an unmistakable sense of relief.

In fact, he actually leaned his head back against the corridor wall, closed his eyes, and wondered if he'd been caught in a dream. It

seemed impossible that he should, proper, boring member of the House of Commons was pretending not only to be carrying on a flagrant affair for the benefit of one woman's husband but also to be passionately in love with another woman, a drama to be played out before her lover.

He heard a rustle of silk. Of course it was Bea. She seemed to be everywhere, with her painted eyebrows and her red mouth. And the rest of her: those far too intelligent eyes, curved little body, and sultry looks.

"Time for bed?" he said, and he let a deliberately suggestive tone slide into his voice like cream.

"Good night, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy." She appeared to be walking toward her chamber. He stretched his leg out so that she would have to step ungracefully across him to continue down the corridor.

"Sir?" she asked. The very tone of her voice had changed. Where was the impudent suggestion? Where were the smoldering looks that she practiced on him so regularly? (Because he knew quite well that she didn't feel desire; she issued such invitations as a matter of course.)

"Will you let me pass, please?" She was getting nettled now.

But Stephen was surrounded by women begging him to pretend to be their lover. What he wanted was just one truthful request. And the fact she had refused to woo him for two days bothered him more than it should. "I should like to read more of that poetry you brought with you," he said.

"I can lend you the book, if you wish. Or you can find it yourself. I left it in the library, since it seems to have become an object of curiosity for all." Her eyes were shadowed, and he couldn't read them.

He reached out and slipped his hand under her elbow.

God, but he was consumed with lust. Even the sleekness of the bare skin of her arm made him leap to attention.

She shook her head, frowning. "I think not, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy."

"A further introduction to poetry," he said, his voice as persuasive as he could make it.

"I gather you wish me to accompany you to the library?"

He nodded. Not that he had actually thought it out.

"Why?" She stared at him, and for once her eyes were neither sultry, nor inviting, nor even particularly friendly. "You, a newly engaged man, must have many places to be."

"Because," he said, through clenched teeth. "Because of this ." He folded her into his arms, and his whole body throbbed with gratitude. She smelled like an exotic perfume tonight, some thick heavy flower of the Nile.

He spread his fingers through her hair, cupping the back of her head and pulling it gently back so he could reach her lips. He could see the perfect oval of her cheek in the dim light. He could see the darker glowing red of her lips. Black lashes fringed her eyes. But none of it mattered, because he couldn't see those eyes well enough to read them.

Did she feel even a fraction of the desire that pulsed through his body? Was she almost trembling? Or was this all the fantasy of an aging man, caught off-guard by a young woman's seductive beauty? Believing

He refused to think too hard. Instead he pulled her head closer to his, closed his mouth on hers, plunging inside. He never kissed like this. He prided himself on consummate expertise, on dancing over a woman's lips, coaxing her to give him her inner sweetness, to reward him with her lips, her mouth. It was all a foretaste of his future treatment of her body. He was a thoughtful lover, cherishing his partner's pleasure as his own.

Not with Bea. His heartbeat pounded with the same rhythm as his tongue. As for technique what technique? It was all he could do to stay upright, to control his hunger.

Yet she melted in his arms with a fervor he had never awoken in a lover before. If he was rudely plundering her mouth, she certainly wasn't fainting at the intrusion. Her arms were around his neck, and she was offering herself. Yet after a second she stepped back in a swish of silk, and he released her. "Where are you going?"

She smiled over her shoulder, and it was the same smile Cleopatra gave Antony. Antony had no hope of escaping; why should he?

"I'm not interested in wooing you, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy, as I think I've made clear. And I might add that my lack of interest is all the greater

since you are now engaged to marry."

"I'm" But he stopped before he said not . Instead he smiled at her, an imitation of all those smiles she gave him, a sexy dance in his eyes. "Too much competition?" he asked softly.

Bea paused and turned her nose in the air. "I don't compete."

He leaned back against the wall, and it was happening again: around Bea, and only around her, he felt in his body, if only in fragile control of it. He deliberately spread his legs. They felt muscle hard as did other parts of his body. Her eyes widened slightly. In one stride he had her pinned against the opposite wall. God, he loved the fact that she was tall enough for him. So many women felt like fragile little dolls in his arms.

"Bea," he growled, looking down at her.

"Mr. Fairfax-Lacy?" she said pertly. But she didn't try to move away. Not even when he brought his mouth down on hers, without apology, without warning, without pleading. Instead she just gasped and shuddered in his arms as his mouth drank from hers, came to her again and again with savage tenderness.

He kissed her until he knew she couldn't pull away and give him that Cleopatra smile. Gone was the seasoned beauty, wise in the ways of the world and quick with her seductive invitations. If he didn't know better, he'd have said she was a pure innocent. It was in her eyes, in the way she trembled in his arms, in the way she clutched his shoulders.

"I do wish you'd change your mind," he said. His voice didn't come out that siren call of the polished politician. No, it sounded deep, dangerous. The voice of a man who would seduce a young unmarried girl. Who instructed her to woo him. The kind of man who had a mistress, and a fiancée, and wanted yet a third woman.

Stephen reveled in it. He ran a slow hand down her side, and then swiftly, before he or she could think better, slid that hand around her sweet little bottom and pulled her hard against his legs. She gasped, and her arms spun tighter around his neck.

For one blissful second he pressed her into the wall, letting her know just how primitive their joining would be.

Then he snapped back and dropped his arms. "Because should you

decide to compete," he said, "I think you would find it worth your while."

His smile was wild and tender and utterly unpolished. It was all Bea could do not to gasp yes, plead, beg woo . Whatever he wanted. Her body was throbbing, liquid with desire, beating through her legs. Even her toes tingled. He wasn't like the gentlemen she'd toyed with in the past. He was a man. More: he was a dangerous man, the sort of man who didn't think twice about taking on a fiancée and a mistress in the same week. What would she be? The third woman?

She couldn't drag her eyes off him though, off his broad shoulders, and off those wicked, wicked laughing eyes. How had she ever thought he was proper? He was some sort of a satyr! She licked her lips and watched his eyes narrow. If he reached for her again, she would do—whatever it was he wanted. The wooing he demanded.

How humiliating. If she did that , begged him in so many words, there would be no escape from all the words her father flung at her. No escape in her own mind. They all crowded together: wanton, short-heeled, soiled, doxy .

No . Bea swallowed hard, pushed herself from the wall, and started down the corridor without a backward glance. She couldn't look back.

Chapter 21

In Which a Marquess Pays a Call on a Lady

As Esme prepared for bed, she wondered exactly how much time she had to herself before Sebastian Bonnington joined her. Because he would, not matter how many future husbands she pretended to have.

She didn't have to wait long. She was barely tucked into bed, with Jeannie sent back to the nether regions of the house, when her door opened. Esme was propped up against the pillows, wide awake. She was unable to sleep very much these days; her back and her belly seemed to be competing to make her uncomfortable.

Sure enough, he had that disapproving look that he always used to have, back when she was married to Miles and flirting with Bernie

Burdett. Esme frowned. She never liked it when he played the Holy Willy then, and she didn't appreciate it now, either.

"What are you doing in my room?" she demanded.

He walked slowly over to the bed. "Thinking about corporal punishment," he said, staring down at her. "Hell-born brat. I can't leave you alone for two days without finding you've attached a male to your skirts."

Esme held on to her anger. She was the angry one. He had left her when she was on the verge of having a child (but he did come back, a little voice reminded her).

"I could have died while you were gone," she said. Her voice sounded petulant and childish. "In childbirth," she qualified.

"I talked to your midwife before I left, and she had no expectations that you would give birth before a week at least," he said, still staring down at her. There was something in his eyes that made her feel uncomfortable. As if she'd disappointed him.

"Midwives don't know everything!" she said shrilly.

He folded his arms across his chest. "I sent my mother to look after you."

"Your mother!" she gasped. "Your mother is here to make certain that I don't marry you!"

"I told her I was a gardener here because I knew she wouldn't be able to resist calling on you. I had to visit my estate, Esme. I've done as much work as I could from afar, but I needed to be there, if only for a day." He ran a hand through his hair. "I stayed up two nights so I could return to you as soon as possible. But it seems you had no trouble occupying yourself."

Esme shot him a swift glance. Sure enough, there were weary circles under his eyes. And a bleak note in his voice that clutched her heart.

"I thought you'd left me," she said, pleating the linen sheet with her fingers. "That you"

"That I'd obeyed you?" he lifted her chin. "Because you did tell me in no uncertain terms that you never wanted to see me again, Esme. That I would ruin your reputation."

"And so you will!" Esme managed.

"Not with my mother here," he said.

There was nothing she could say to that. Of course, he was right. The very presence of the formidable Marchioness Bonnington would stop all gossip about his presence on her estate.

"But I see I didn't need to worry," he said ironically. "It seems you made other plans for the protection of your name."

"I can't marry you, Sebastian," she said in a low voice. "I want respectability. Our marriage would be the greatest scandal to reach the ton in years. Your mother said that, and she's right. I don't want to be Infamous Esme anymore. Please understand!"

"I understand all right," he said.

That was definitely disappointment in his voice. Esme swallowed hard. Her back was aching, and he was angry at her. And he was right. She shouldn't have made that pretense of an engagement with Fairfax-Lacy.

Suddenly he pushed her over a few inches and sat down on the bed. "Back hurting?" And at her nod, he said, "Roll over."

Esme rolled to the right, and those big hands started rubbing her neck and shoulders. The relief was so great that she literally forgot everything else for a few moments. Sebastian had miraculous hands. Somehow he was ironing away all the pain that crouched in her spine.

A half hour later she rolled back, propped herself up against the pillow, and eyed Sebastian. He had to leave her bedchamber. Women in confinement did not entertain gentlemen to whom they were not married. But she had to try to explain her own stupidities first.

"I thought to marry Mr. Fairfax-Lacy because"

He interrupted her. "Are you sure that you remembered to warn poor Mr. Fairfax-Lacy of his impending marriage? Of course, I would never suggest that he looked disagreeably surprised, but he seemed to me disagreeably surprised."

Esme raised her chin. "He was merely startled by my public announcement. We had thought to wait until after the child's birth."

Sebastian didn't seem angry anymore. "I haven't even said hello to that child yet." He spread his hands on the soft cambric of her night rail. "He's all lumps and bumps. I don't think there's any room in there."

"The midwife told me today that he is well, ready," Esme said. She felt a pulse of worry. The child seemed impossibly large to her.

But Sebastian looked up and grinned. "Don't worry. He'll slip out like a greased pig."

"That is so vulgar!" Esme scolded.

"Look at this!" he said, disregarding her. "If I push on his little foot, he pushes back!"

They watched for a second and then burst into laughter.

"Oh, no!" Esme said, clapping a hand over her mouth. "My goodness, I hope no one heard that."

"They'll think you're entertaining your future husband," Sebastian said, shrugging a bit. "Although no one here would give a bean who you were entertaining. I have to say, Esme, I've heard about your aunt's house parties for years, but this one takes the cake. Who's that extraordinarily luxurious-looking girl with all the paint on her face?"

"Lady Beatrix Lennox," Esme said, "and don't say anything cruel about her, because I like her hugely."

"The scandalous one? Daughter of the Duke of Wintersail?"

"Exactly."

Sebastian gave a little whistle. "Quite a gathering. You were certainly right when you thought it might endanger your reputation."

"My aunt invited a few of her friends without my knowledge, and one thing led to another. And what about you? If anyone finds out you've returned from France and are attending this gathering, the ton will dine out on it for days."

"Not with my mother here. And I don't give a hang if they do," Sebastian said, rubbing her tummy all over. "Face it, sweetheart. You're not made for the respectable life. You collect scandals the way other women collect china. I have some trouble envisioning you as a dutiful wife of a party member."

He leaned over, his face just an inch from hers. A dark blonde curl fell over his forehead. She could smell him all that potent, clean-smelling male body.

"What are you doing in my bedroom?" Esme asked, quite annoyed to find that her voice was breathless.

"Paying a respectable visit to my future wife." His eyes were the blue of a mountain lake. Except no mountain lake ever had that smoky look way down deep that made her want to squirm. "Surely you aren't expecting your estimable fiancé to visit your chambers this evening. Since I intend to be your next fiancé, I have every right to be here. Besides, I feel a certain discontent with my performance. I must not have imprinted myself on your skin, given that you leaped directly into another man's embrace."

She couldn't squirm because he was hovering over her. "Certainly not," she said, pulling herself together. "Return to your own room, if you would be so kind. I'm sure you did a very good job of imprinting yourself on my skin. More than adequate. Now I'd like to ask you to leave."

She put her palms on his chest to push him away. He was warm and big, and somehow her palms just stuck and forgot to shove him off the bed.

He lowered his head and just kissed the top of her ear. "I'd rather stay with you." His lips slid to her mouth. He tasted of cognac and Sebastian.

Just a kiss, Esme told herself as his tongue touched hers. She couldn't help it; her mouth opened with a gasp. He tasted so good, so male, so comforting and intoxicating, all at once. He moved so they were lying side by side.

"We're not going to make love again," she managed to say. "My back hurt all day after you left."

"I'm sorry about that," and he actually sounded sorry. Except he had his hands under her night rail, and that wasn't her back he was stroking.

Esme gave up. Her body melted the moment his fingers slid up her thighs. So she buried her hands in his hair and let herself stroke circles down his neck with her tongue.

He pushed her leg up to give him better access, and she didn't protest, just jerked at his shirt so that he reared back and stripped it off, giving her all that honey-sweet skin to kiss and lick and touch.

They didn't say much for a while, there being no need for speech. Esme was gasping and moaning, and when she absolutely had to make a point, her voice came out in a husky mixture of a moan and a squeak. "Sebastian please!"

"We can't," he said. "Your back." His voice sounded strangled, deep and hungry. He repeated what he was doing, and Esme clutched him feverishly.

"I don't care about my back!"

But he knew her, he knew her body, he knew everything she couldn't stop now, not when he was stroking her like that, hands so smooth and rough at once. It took his mouth to stop the scream that tore from her chest.

The shame of it, Esme realized in the early dawn, was that she'd promptly fallen asleep in his arms, having given no thought to his pleasure. When was the last time she'd slept straight through the night, without waking over and over because her back hurt?

His tousled hair was the color of guinea coins. He was lying on his stomach, and the sheet was pulled to his mid-back. All Esme could see was the flare of his shoulders.

The babe seemed to be asleep. Sebastian was definitely asleep. As she watched, he gave a little humph, almost a snore, and lapsed into deep breathing. He'd stayed up at night so that he could come back to her. She had to push down the fierce joy she felt. Respectable widows didn't feel this sort of thing.

It was too much temptation for any woman to endure, even a widow bent on the respectable life.

She scooted the linen sheet down onto his legs. His back curved down to a sweet spot with two dimples and that little brown mark that wasn't hereditary, according to his mother. It looked like a small star. She would have leaned down to kiss it, but an awfully large stomach was in the way. So she contented herself with finger kisses, walking her way over all those muscles, circling his dimples, climbing back up that taut pair of buttocks.

He shifted under her fingers and groaned a little in his sleep. Sebastian made her feel more sensual than she ever had in bed with a man. As if her mere touch were enough. Before, it always seemed that men were interested in her breasts, in her legs in all the parts of her that she'd been born with. Not in the way she touched, or kissed. Not in what she thought they ought to do next.

The very thought had her heart racing. She spread her hand and cupped one of his muscled buttocks.

Suddenly he made a noise in his throat and turned onto his back. Her fingers slid away and ended up on his stomach. He was still sleeping, lashes dark against his cheek. It was almost frightening how much she desired him. A lady shouldn't feel such a dark pounding wave of lust. That was certain.

What she should have done was wake this slumbering god and sent him on his way. Because she needed him to scoop up his terrible mama and leave her house, so that she could have her baby and begin her life again. Despite herself, her fingers trailed downwards. He was magnificent.

When she looked up, he was looking at her. And he didn't seem to be sleepy anymore.

Chapter 22

The Infernal Circle

When Dante was writing *The Inferno*, making up all those circles of hellish occupants the gluttons, the adulterers, the the whatever she should have included the Sewing Circle. To Esme's mind, they deserved a circle all their own. Admittedly, her memory of *The Inferno* was rather foggy, but weren't the gluttons sitting around eating and eating as punishment for a life of overly rich dining? In Esme's version of hell, overly righteous women would have to sit on small, upright chairs and sew seam after seam in coarse white cotton while Mrs. Cable read improving literature aloud.

They had been sewing for about fifteen minutes when Mrs. Barret-Ducroir smiled genially at Esme and said, "That child of yours won't

want to wait much longer."

Esme looked down at her vast expanse of stomach, suppressing a wince as a foot made its presence known just under her ribs. "The midwife has suggested that it's only a matter of a few days."

"They don't know everything," Lady Winifred said comfortably, putting down her sheet.

Esme had noticed that everyone except Mrs. Cable took every opportunity to stop sewing.

"The midwife for my first child told me every day for a month that today was the day," Lady Winifred continued. "Consequently I refused to actually believe that I was in labor when the time came. Is Lady Withers going to join us today, my dear? Arabella is such an amusing woman. And so brave. I know the loss of three husbands has been a true source of grief in her life, but she never seems disheartened."

Mrs. Cable said, very frostily, "I doubt that Lady Withers has risen at this hour."

But Arabella pranced through the door at that very moment, blowing kisses in every direction. "Ladies!" she announced. "I come to you on an errand of mercy."

Arabella took a few moments to seat herself. She was wearing a morning dress of celestial blue muslin, which opened down the front and pulled back to reveal an underskirt of sprigged muslin. She looked charming, effortlessly elegant and, to Esme's eyes, unmistakably mischievous.

"Surely you heard who arrived at this house last evening!" she announced, once she had arranged her gown to her satisfaction.

Even Mrs. Cable looked up from her seam.

"The most disreputable man in all England!" Arabella trumpeted.

Esme groaned inwardly.

"The Duke of York!" Lady Henrietta exclaimed.

"No, no, slightly lower in rank," Arabella said, obviously enjoying herself hugely. "It seems quite overheated in the morning room, Esme my dear. Perhaps that fire is too high for the season." She took out a

small blue fan and began fanning herself.

"I'm having trouble keeping myself on the cool side as well," Lady Winifred said, eyeing the fan. "We've entered that time of life, I suppose."

Arabella dropped the fan as if it had bitten her.

"Who is it?" Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq said eagerly. "Who arrived last night?"

"Bonnington," Arabella said after a magnificent pause, "has returned."

It was a good line. And if it weren't for the fact that Esme's own life was being paraded before the gossips, she would have applauded Arabella's dramatic turn of phrase.

There was a collective intake of breath. Lady Winifred was obviously amused; Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq was shocked; Mrs. Cable was so horrified that she covered her face with her hands, as if she'd been faced with the devil himself.

"He's reformed," Arabella dropped into the silence that followed.

"I doubt that very much!" snapped Mrs. Cable, seemingly unable to contain herself.

"Astounding, yet true." Arabella picked up her fan again and glanced significantly at the ladies. "He's come back to England to prostrate himself at my niece's feet!"

"As well he might," Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq said rather sourly. "After all, he did" But her voice trailed off when she realized that mentioning the fact that Esme's husband had died grappling with her latest guest wasn't entirely well mannered.

Esme looked down at her sheet and very precisely put another crooked stitch into the hem. That foot was still in her ribs. Oddly enough, she didn't feel the pinched sensation that she usually got at the very mention of Miles. Poor Miles. She placed another stitch. Dear Miles.

"Prrrrostrate himself," Arabella said with pleasure. "As you say, Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq, Bonnington is at least partially responsible for the death of poor Lord Rawlings. Although his doctors had said that Esme's late husband was liable to die at any moment. I lost a husband

to a weak heart myself; it's a terrible circumstance. At any rate, Marquess Bonnington is overcome with contrition. Quite beside himself."

Everyone looked at Esme, so she tried to look like a grieving widow. Far be it from her to diminish Arabella's performance. Why was it that whenever she was supposed to look miserable, she felt cheerful? "The marquess has certainly expressed his repentance," she agreed, placing another stitch so as to avoid Mrs. Cable's piercing glance. Really, sewing had its uses.

"How can Bonnington possibly think to alleviate Lady Rawlings's situation?" Mrs. Cable demanded. "What's done is done. The man should stay on the Continent, where he is less likely to corrupt others."

"Unless he's asked for her hand in marriage?" Lady Winifred said, giving Esme a shrewd look.

"A revolting proposition," Mrs. Cable said tightly. "Lady Rawlings is not even out of a full year of mourning! Only think of the scandal!"

"Oh, one can always think of the scandal," Lady Winifred said. "But it's so seldom worth the effort. The marquess, after all, has a very fine estate."

"My thought precisely," Arabella said, beaming. "I do believe the man is genuinely overcome by penitence. He wishes to mitigate the evils he visited on her in any way possible."

"What makes you believe that his intentions are honorable?" Mrs. Cable wanted to know. "After his behavior last summer!"

Esme felt a pang of guilt. She was hardly innocent when it came to the loss of Sebastian's sterling reputation, since he had fabricated a story of depravity in order to protect her reputation. "His mother accompanied him to this house, which seems to bode well for his sincerity," she noted. "The Marchioness Bonnington is also staying with us."

"My goodness!" Lady Winifred exclaimed. "If Bonnington persuaded his mother to accompany him, the man must indeed be serious. Lady Bonnington is as stiff-rumped a lady as I've ever met!"

"I sincerely hope that you informed him that marriage was impossible," Mrs. Cable told Esme.

Esme suddenly remembered her supposed engagement to Fairfax-Lacy. There was more than one reason why marriage to Sebastian was impossible. Rather than answer, she started sewing again.

"After all, the man forged a marriage certificate in order to take a lady's chastity!" Mrs. Cable continued. "The poor Duchess of Girton might well have been taken in by his depravity, if it hadn't been for the happenstance of his stumbling into your bedchamber rather than hers. And that's not to mention his hand in your husband's death."

Arabella leaned forward. From the look of pure pleasure in her eyes, Esme could see her aunt had prepared herself for just this moment.

"A woman of mercy does not spurn a genuinely remorseful soul," Arabella intoned. "By doing so, she would be responsible for any lapses in judgement that followed. No, Esme's path is clear. She must aid and succor the poor unfortunate sinner in his moment of contrition."

"The devil is full of all subtlety and all mischief," Mrs. Cable snapped. "Acts."

"By mercy and truth, iniquity is purged," Arabella retorted, without even pausing for breath. "Proverbs."

Esme bit her lip so she wouldn't ruin the moment by laughing. Mrs. Cable was flattened, trapped between the Bible and her abhorrence of iniquitous behavior.

Lady Winifred jumped in at this point. "I quite agree with you, Arabella dearest. It takes a truly charitable heart to recognize where the path of goodness lies."

Arabella was obviously trying to look as if she had a charitable heart. To Esme, it looked as if she had wind.

"I don't support it," Mrs. Cable snapped. "The man is a poisonous influence. You'll have to watch the young women in the house very carefully, Lady Rawlings. He may besmirch them, corrupt them, deprave them!"

No, Esme thought ruefully, he's only interested in besmirching me. Although she wouldn't argue with the idea that Sebastian was depraved. He had no sense of propriety in bed. Esme's cheeks grew hot at the very thought of the liberties he had taken the previous night. She wrenched her attention back to Mrs. Cable.

"A man like that is more than likely to seduce the maids," she was saying. "There'll be no woman in the house safe from him."

Too tired, Esme thought. He's definitely too tired for the maids.

Arabella giggled. "It's a pity I'm too old for the man."

Mrs. Cable gasped, but Lady Winifred chuckled. "Handsome, isn't he? I remember seeing Bonnington riding to the hounds, last year it was, before all the scandal broke. He looked as regal as a prince. A prince in a fairy story," she clarified, "not one of our own." Everyone accepted that. The royal dukes were more easily described as fat and friendly than regal.

With pressed lips, Mrs. Cable backed down. "Well, you won't accept Bonnington's proposal, of course," she instructed Esme. "But I do acknowledge Lady Withers's point about improving his soul. It is not ours to question why the Lord places a sinner at our doorstep. We must simply endure while we aid in the cultivation of a better life."

"I must try saying that to my husband," Lady Winifred murmured to Arabella. "I endure, and he never seems to cultivate. Perhaps I could bore him into virtue by reading the Bible aloud."

But Mrs. Cable heard her, and the Sewing Circle disbanded on an acrimonious note.

Chapter 23

Various Forms of Advertisement

Lady Rowlings's Rose Salon

"I suppose your mother felt she couldn't attend you," Lady Bonnington said to Esme with her usual lack of finesse. "Fanny does have strict notions of propriety."

"My dear sister is very preoccupied by the fate of the poor," Arabella said, with a little snap of her teeth. "She cannot be in as many places as she would wish."

"She wrote me as much," Esme put in. Though why on earth she always defended her mother, she didn't know.

The marchioness's expression showed exactly what she thought about Arabella's fib. "Yet during the confinement of her only daughter!" Lady Bonnington said. "Quite dismaying. You must find her absence painful," she said to Esme.

Esme smiled tightly. "Naturally I am proud of Mama's unfailing attention to those less fortunate than ourselves."

To her surprise, Lady Bonnington's eyes were not scornful; Esme could see a gleam of sympathy there. "As you undoubtedly know," she announced, "I am close friends with your mother. Perhaps the combination of my presence and your entirely acceptable engagement will be enough to change her mind. I fancy I do have some small authority in society, you know." She bent toward Esme with the fanged smile of a leopard about to spring. "If I champion your reentry into society upon your marriage to Mr. Fairfax-Lacy, I feel quite certain that the ton will quickly dismiss the foibles of your youth."

Esme gave her a weak smile. Obviously Lady Bonnington was offering her a pact. Marry Fairfax-Lacy instead of her son, and the marchioness would reinstate Esme in the good graces of her mother and society. She nodded, meeting Lady Bonnington's eyes. "That would be most kind."

At that moment the rest of the party entered the room. Sebastian strolled over to Esme. "How are you?" he said, leaning over her sofa and speaking in her ear with unmistakable intimacy.

"Stop that!" she scolded, trying to avoid Lady Bonnington's glare.

Sebastian followed her glance. "Ah, my dear mother is here. Now where's your inamorato? Mr. Fairfellow. What is his name? I loathe double-barreled names, don't you?"

"Hush, you monster!" she said, pinching his arm. Under his laughter she caught a spark of something jealousy, perhaps? She decided that her plan wasn't a failure after all. So she held out a languid hand to Fairfax-Lacy. "Ah, there you are!" she cried. "It seemed ages since the men retired for port!"

A few moments later, Bea entered the salon to find that Stephen Fairfax-Lacy was dancing attendance on Esme in a manner that could only be called lavish. They were snugly tucked into a small couch

together, and as Bea watched, Stephen tenderly rearranged the cushion behind Esme's back. She felt a prick of jealousy. Apparently Esme and Stephen had discovered a shared affinity for bawdy jokes; Stephen kept murmuring things into Esme's ear that made them both roar with laughter.

They certainly looked like an affianced couple. But Bea couldn't work out what exactly had happened the previous evening. Why had Esme announced that she and Stephen were marrying? Presumably because they had agreed to marry, a sensible little voice in the back of her head insisted. But and this seemed the crucial question to Bea—what was Marquess Bonnington doing in the house, and what was his relation to Esme? As Bea watched, the marquess strode over to join the lovebirds. Esme began sparkling like a tree decorated with candles, and laughing (Bea thought uncharitably) like a hyena.

Bea herself was dressed for attention, and she wasn't going to get that if she kept hugging the fireplace like a debutante wearing too many ruffles to dance. So she drifted over to the group and paused for a second until they looked up.

Esme's face lit with pleasure. "Bea, darling! Do join us. Mr. Fairfax-Lacy is telling me abominable jests about codpieces."

"Codpieces?" Bea inquired, walking toward her. She was wearing a gown of slate-gray silk. Slate-gray was the kind of color governesses wore, but this gown was cut with cunning precision to make it appear that she was a governess hiding the soul of a Jezebel. The bosom was as low as an evening gown's, but the addition of a trifling bit of lace gave the bodice a faint claim to respectability. "What is a codpiece?"

Naturally, the gentlemen stood at her arrival, so Bea nimbly slipped next to Esme, taking Stephen's seat.

Stephen himself answered her question, one dark eyebrow raised. "Have you not heard of codpieces, Lady Beatrix? Gentlemen wore them in the sixteenth century. Rounded pieces of leather sometimes decorated with ribbons."

"Wore them? Where did they" Bea broke off, suddenly guessing where they wore them. Now she thought of it, she had seen portraits of men wearing codpieces over their tights. It was wicked of him to laugh at her in such a fashion, though.

"Life must have been so much easier for women in those days," Esme said, her voice spiced with mischief. "One could presumably choose a

man by the number of ribbons he wore. Bea, we must sit together all evening. Our gowns suit each other extraordinarily."

Esme was dressed in a dark silvery crimson gown whose bosom was as low as Bea's but didn't include any disguising lace. Given the fact that Esme was approximately twice as endowed in the chest area, Bea figured that the contrast was personally unfortunate. But it was better than watching Stephen nestle up to Esme's curves.

"So, would you insist your husband match his daily ribbons to your gown?" Bonnington asked Esme. There was a sardonic twist to his lips. To Bea's mind, something smoldered in the marquess's eyes when he looked at Esme. And the same could be said for the way her lips curved up at his question. If she laughed a great deal while talking to Stephen, she got a husky undertone when she spoke to the marquess that was utterly suggestive.

"Ah, what a dilemma!" Esme said. "I doubt my fiance would agree to wear rosy ribbons, were I to wear a pink costume." She threw Stephen a languishing look.

Stephen sat down in a chair beside the settee. He was suffering from awareness of the fact that if he were indeed an Elizabethan gentleman, wearing little more on his legs than some thin stockings, he'd be grateful for a codpiece, because his body's reaction to Bea's outrageous gown would have been all too obvious. "For you, Lady Rawlings, I would wear the colors of the rainbow," he said, pitching his voice to a velvety earnestness.

"How fortunate that you, rather than I, are marrying Lady Rawlings," the marquess drawled, leaning back in his chair and crossing his legs. "Lady Beatrix, would you demand that a man make an ass of himself?"

Bea could feel Stephen watching her. She gave the marquess a look of liquid promise. Bea had a distinct preference for dark hair, but the marquess's tawny golden-brown hair could well nigh change her mind. "I do believe I would insist on the removal of all ribbons."

"Oh?" he asked. He had lovely blue eyes. If only she weren't so fond of dark eyes. "You prefer a naked codpiece, Lady Beatrix?"

"I would prefer that my husband not advertise," she said. "Don't you agree, Esme? If a man wore too many ribbons, he might become the target of many women's attentions." Bea looked at Stephen, her face as innocent as she could manage. "And the next thing one knew, one's husband would have virtually turned into a peacock, thinking that

every woman within eyesight is longing for his attentions."

Vixen, Stephen thought. "Do you mean his eyesight or theirs ?" he asked.

"I shall have to take the idea of naked codpieces into consideration," Esme put in. "Perhaps we should have a game of charades. There must be some Elizabethan clothing up in the attics."

She turned to Stephen and said, with a simper, "But, darling, wouldn't you mind dreadfully if I stripped you of ornamentation?"

Bea thought Esme was playing a dangerous game. There was something wild about the marquess, something ungentleman-like, that made Bea a trifle nervous. And yet Esme was toying with him as if he were a mouse and she a kitten. But it was closer to the truth to see him as a tiger, and Esme a mouse.

For his part, Stephen was fairly certain that his courtship of Esme was piquing Bea's jealousy. There was a stormy something in her eyes that he liked. So he picked up Esme's hand and told her, "I would strip myself naked, if you wished."

"Even in this state?" Esme said, gesturing toward her nonexistent middle.

"If carrying a child made every woman as beautiful as you, Lady Rawlings, England's population would be growing by leaps and bounds." Stephen kissed Esme's hand as he watched Bea out of the corner of his eye. Her hands were clenched into fists. Stephen felt a burst of cheer. As long as he wasn't knocked into a corner by Bonnington, his plan was a success.

"I do believe that most women would faint at the idea of gaining such a waistline," Esme was saying.

"The most beautiful things in nature are those about to burst into flower: a bud on the verge of becoming a rose, a tree dripping with ripe apples. And you are more beautiful than a rose, Lady Rawlings."

"Quite the dandy, aren't you?" Marquess Bonnington said to Stephen. There was a dangerous gleam in his eyes. "I wouldn't have thought a politician would have so much address. You could do much worse for a husband, Lady Rawlings."

"I merely speak the truth when I feel pressed," Stephen said promptly,

hoping that Bonnington wouldn't lose control and floor him. Clearly the man had a prior claim. "Lady Rawlings is so beautiful that one can hardly stop oneself from singing her praises. It was the most surprising moment of my life when she agreed to marry me." He sighed, a languishing expulsion of breath. "The keen pleasure of that moment will never leave my memory."

Esme blushed faintly, and Bea realized that Esme had, indeed, decided to marry Stephen, no matter what her previous relationship with Marquess Bonnington might have been. Who could possibly choose to raise a child alone when she might have Stephen as a father? To Bea's annoyance, Stephen began kissing Esme's every fingertip. Now her stomach was churning with jealousy.

"Your eyes are the color of sapphires," Stephen said, his voice a low croon. "And your lips are finer than rubies."

Bea cleared her throat. Stephen looked around in a faintly irritated fashion and then said, "Forgive me. Lady Beatrix, Marquess Bonnington. You must forgive the flush of early love, the delight with which one greets his bride-to-be"

"I've never met a woman whom I wanted to compare to sapphires," the Marquess Bonnington said with an easy shrug of his shoulders. "What appeals to me is a kind of willowy grace an elegance of form."

Esme stiffened slightly.

"Isn't it the poet Petrarch who compares his lady to a slender willow, swaying in the breeze? That appeals to me much more than comparing my lady to flinty little gems."

"Petrarch loved a woman who was only twelve years old," Stephen said dismissively. "I leave the younger set to you, Lord Bonnington. I find young women tiresome. A woman who is a woman is the most appealing." He carefully didn't even glance at Bea. Unless he was much mistaken, a pale pink nipple was just visible through the lace of her bodice. One more look at her chest and he would pick her up and stride right out of the room, and it wouldn't be his decoration that was stripped.

Bea was having trouble biting back an unpleasant comment. Clearly she was a member of the younger set whom Stephen professed to find tiresome. And presumably Stephen expected her to compete with Esme, though how she was supposed to do that, short of stuffing her corset with all the cotton in Wiltshire, she had no idea. The least she

could do was to help the cause of true love.

"Lord Bonnington," she said rather jerkily, "I brought the most exquisite book of poetry with me. And you had not yet joined the house party when we read some of it aloud. Would you like me to introduce you to the work?"

"I would be more than pleased," he said, rising and giving her an elegant bow.

Bea didn't look to see what Stephen thought. He was probably grateful. After all, if she took Bonnington off of Esme's hands, he had no competition to worry about.

They walked into the corridor together. She took a deep breath and gave Lord Bonnington the full benefit of one of her smoldering looks. There must be something wrong with her. He looked no more impressed than had Sebastian. Bea blinked to hold back sudden tears. Was she was she losing her attractiveness to men? That was inconceivable. It was all she had.

The library was just down the corridor from the Rose Salon. Esme's library was a snug nutshell of a room, all lined with books that gave off a sleepy, satisfied smell. Bea felt better immediately. The library had been one of the few places in her father's house where she'd felt happy.

Lord Bonnington walked away from her and looked out one of the arching windows that faced into the garden, so Bea followed. She still could hardly believe that he hadn't shown her the faintest interest. Perhapsperhaps it had been too dim in the corridor. Perhaps he hadn't seen the expression in her eyes.

It had rained all day. A silver layer of mist crept over the garden, drifting down to a blocky structure that Bea knew was the rose arbor.

"I gather you think that Lady Rawlings should marry Mr. Fairfax-Lacy," Lord Bonnington said abruptly, looking at the garden, and not at her.

"I"

"And you brought me here to give them breathing space."

Bea swallowed. She could hardly say that she'd brought him to the library in a weak effort to make Stephen Fairfax-Lacy jealous. Or to

prove that she was still desirable.

"I do think that Lady Rawlings would be happier if she were married," she said, steadying her voice.

"Married to him ?"

The scorn in his voice lashed her into speech. "Esme would be extremely fortunate to marry Mr. Fairfax-Lacy!"

"He's a stick," Bonnington said, still gazing out into the garden.

"No, he's not. He's quite handsome, and he's funny, and kind. And he he seems to care for her," Bea said.

"So do I."

What could she say to that? She stood next to him, feeling the chill that breathed off the leaded window panes.

"Did she tell you to take me away? Did she send you some sort of signal?"

"No, no," Bea said. "It wasn't like that at all! I merely I merely"

He turned and looked down at her. After a moment, he said, "We're in the same boat, then."

She couldn't ask what boat that was because she was afraid that she knew. "Absolutely not," she replied stiffly.

"Are you saying that you don't wish to marry that proper M.P. in there?" The touch of disbelief in his voice made her raise her head.

"I do not."

There was a skeptical curl to his lip.

"I don't wish to marry anyone." She walked over to the couch and sat down, not bothering to tilt her hips from side to side in the walk she had perfected at age fifteen. The man was not interested in her. That slow fire she saw in his eyes was for Esme, not for her.

But he did follow her, throwing himself down on the couch. "If I thought jealousy would help, I would have a go at pretending to be in love with you. But it wouldn't make any difference," Bonnington said flatly. "I'm sorry to say that the man appears enamored of Esme

Rawlings. And once she draws you in, it's damn hard to look at another woman."

"I am not interested in Mr. Fairfax-Lacy," Bea insisted, more for the sake of her pride than anything else.

He didn't even answer her. "I expect he thinks you're too young."

"Too scandalous," Bea put in, unable to pretend any longer.

"Scandalous, hmmm?"

She nodded. She knew Marquess Bonnington by reputation; well, who didn't? He used to be considered one of the most upright men in the ton. There'd never been a whisper of scandal about the man until last summer. Not even a shred. If he knew her past, he would spit at her and leave the room immediately. But he didn't seem to be reacting with condemnation.

"Didn't you side-step with Sandhurst? Why on earth did you choose that odious mushroom?" he asked, and she couldn't hear any censure in his voice. Just a kind of lazy curiosity.

She shrugged. "He had a lovely bow. He complimented me."

He looked at her without saying anything.

"And my father loathed him," she added.

"I expect the noble public servant holds it against you, though." The marquess's eyes were kind, too. As kind as Stephen's. What was it with these men? They didn't react to her best overtures, and then they made her feel like crying.

"Actually, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy said that he wanted a mistress with less experience," she said, her wry grin crooked.

He stared at her. "Fairfax-Lacy said that?"

She nodded.

"You're better off without him. Why on earth would you wish to be a mistress to such an intolerable lout? Or a mistress to any man, for that matter?" He was looking at her so intently that Bea wondered whether he'd suddenly noticed she was a woman. Was he going to offer her a consolatory kiss? For all she'd drawn him to the library, she didn't want him to touch her.

"I suppose I don't wish to be a mistress," she said, dismissing the memory of Stephen's kisses. "Nor a wife either."

"Humph," he said, looking unconvinced. "Well, then, where's that poetry you brought me in here for? I shouldn't like to go back to the salon without having read some of it. Lord knows what they'll think we were doing."

Bea smiled back, feeling an unwilling pulse of friendship. He got up and threw another log into the fireplace and then walked back to the couch.

"Here it is," she said, plucking the book off the end table.

He started reading and his eyebrows rose. "I suppose this is from Esme's personal library?"

"No." She blushed. "I brought it with me. Truly, some of the poetry is quite quite unexceptional."

Bea liked his chuckle. She drew up her legs and curled into her favorite positionthe one she would never assume before a man because it didn't emphasize how slender her limbs were.

"I like this," he said. ' "O faire Boy, trust not to thy beauty's wings ."

She nodded.

He looked over at her with a wry grin. "I spent a great deal of my life trusting the wrong things. My title, for example."

"Your beauty?" she said daringly.

"Not so much I was convinced that I had to live up to the dignity of my title. I suppose I trusted my reputation too much."

Bea's smile mirrored his. "Whereas I simply threw mine away."

"Then perhaps you are the one who trusts your beauty overmuch." He put the book to the side. "Shall we return to the salon, Lady Beatrix?"

She put her feet down and rose. He looked down at her, and Bea felt a faint blush rise in her cheeks. "If I hadn't met Esme first, you likely would have been the making of me, Lady Beatrix."

"I'm not suitable for someone who honors their reputation," she observed, starting toward the door.

A large hand curled around her hand, drawing it under his arm. "Ah, but it wouldn't have taken long for you to convince me of the worthlessness of reputation. Esme didn't even try, and I was ready to throw it away as soon as I met her."

She looked a question as they walked through the corridor.

"She was married at that point."

"Now she isn't," Bea observed.

"And therein lies my trouble. I am of the fixed opinion that Esme should marry me and no other." He glanced down at Bea. "I am telling you this merely because I wouldn't want you to worry if I have to take out your darling Fairfax-Lacy."

"Take out?" Bea said sharply. "What on earth do you mean by that, sir?"

He shrugged. "I doubt it will come to violence. But no one is going to marry Esme but myself."

Chapter 24

Waltzing on One's Deathbed

Trying to not feel guilty because one's wife is dying is a difficult task. Damn near impossible, Rees finally decided. After all, they'd been married for yearsnine or ten, he estimated. He'd married Helene when she was barely out of the schoolroom. They were both too young to know better. Yet it wasn't entirely his fault the marriage failed, no matter what she said about it.

But he never, ever thought of her as not being there. Not there to send him nagging letters, or curl her lip at him as they passed. Not there to send him horrid little notes after he debuted a new piece of music, putting her finger directly on the weakest spot, and not saying a word about the best of it.

Damn it, she couldn't die.

He'd been to Lady Rawlings's house a mere few months ago, and Helene had seemed perfectly healthy then. A little too thin, perhaps. But she was always thin. Not like Lina's overflowing little body, all curves and fleshy parts. Rees frowned. Surely it wasn't correct to think about one's mistress while riding in a carriage to greet one's dying wife. And was greet the right word?

It was with a great sense of relief that Rees realized his carriage was finally pulling up in front of Shantill House. It wasn't that he cared for his wife, of course. He didn't. Hadn't the faintest feelings for her of that nature. It was merely natural anxiety that had his chest feeling as if it were clamped in a vise. His fists kept curling, and he could bellow with rage. At what? Helene, for growing ill? No!

He had to be sweet, calm, tell her loving things. Because she was dying. His bitter-tongued, frigid little wife was dying.

God knows, that should probably have given him a sense of relief. Instead he couldn't seem to swallow, and he actually had to support himself on the side of the carriage when he descended, because his knees felt weak for a moment.

He could tell by the butler's minatory gaze Slope, wasn't that his name? that he probably should have changed his garments before leaping into a carriage. Instead he ran a hand through his hair, doubtless disheveling it more than before. "I've come to see my wife," he said brusquely, heading past Slope and up the stairs. He knew where Helene stayed when she was at Lady Rawlings's house. Not that he visited her bedchamber, naturally, but he'd noted the room.

Dimly he realized that Slope was calling after him. Impatient, he stopped and glared down the stairs. "What is it, man?"

"The countess is not in her chamber. She can be found in the Rose Salon."

Rees blinked. Seemed an odd place to stage a dying scene, but who was he to cavil? Perhaps she wouldn't die until tomorrow. He all but galloped down the stairs, brushed by Slope and stopped.

A typical scene of English country life greeted him. A stout peer was dozing in a low chair by the fire. A beautiful little tart of a girl was leaning over her embroidery, her lips painted a fantastic red. And there were a few other remnants of English nobility strewn around the room.

But it was the piano that held his attention.

He'd know her playing anywhere, of course. She was seated at the pianoforte, and not by herself, either. They were playing one of Beethoven's sonatas in E-flat major. And she was laughing. As he watched, her companion leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. Kissed Helene! True, it was just a brush of a kiss. But Helene blushed.

Rees's body went from cold to burning hot and back to cold again, in the mere moment he stood in the doorway. Suddenly he was aware of the butler standing just at his shoulder, of the wintery morning sunlight making Helene's pale hair look like strands of silver. Of the veryaliveness of her. They started playing again and she was swaying slightly, her shoulder just bumping her partner's arm. Her face was glowing with joy, as it always did when she played. Always. Helene and he had only lived in the same house for a matter of months, but he'd never forgotten the way she looked when she played the piano.

It was that joy that had made him fall in love with her. The very thought shocked his senses back into movement. Fall in love? Ha!

"I see that the report of your demise was overhasty," he drawled in the nastiest tone he could summon. And Earl Godwin was pretty much an expert at giving offense.

Helene looked up, and he saw her mouth form a little.

Oh. But the next moment she turned to her partner and said saucily, "I'm so sorry; I almost lost my place, Stephen." And her fingers flew over the keys again, just as if he weren't there.

Stephen? Who the hell was Stephen?

Rees had a vague sense he'd seen the man before. He was handsome, in a pallid, English sort of way. Damn it, he'd been rooked. Although it wasn't clear to him why he had been called as audience. Why in the hell had his wife wanted him to jump to her bidding? He wasn't going to stand around and give her the satisfaction of gloating over his presence. For tuppence he'd turn around and head straight back for London. But he'd been on the road for two days, and his horses were exhausted.

"Excuse me," an amused voice said, just at his elbow. Lady Withers smiled at him. She was a quite lovely woman of a certain age and Esme Rawlings's aunt, if he weren't mistaken.

"Lord Godwin," she said. "How splendid to have you join us. The countess did mention that you might make a brief visit." For a moment her eyes danced over to his wife, cozily tucked against her piano partner.

"Who the hell is that?" he snarled, jerking his head backwards, dismissing the fleeting thought that he might actually greet Lady Withers.

..he blinked as if the room were so filled with gentry that she might have trouble identifying the pallid Englishman. "Mr. Fairfax-Lacy is the Member of Parliament for Oxfordshire, and such an intelligent man. He also holds the honorary title of the Earl of Spade, although he chooses not to use it. We are all enjoying his company."

Rees was pulling himself together. He'd be damned if he showed any sort of husbandly emotion before a smirking viscountess. And since he wasn't feeling any of those husbandly feelings, that should be simple. Unless murderous was considered a husbandly emotion.

Then Helene was before him, holding out her hand and sinking into a curtsy. "Rees. I must apologize for my letter," she said, as tranquil as ever. "While the midwife in the village did suggest I had pleurisy, it turned out to be something far more innocent."

"Oh?"

"Well, you see pleurisy starts with a red rash. But I had beard bum, as it turned out," she said, laughing slightly. "Aren't I the naive one, then? I suppose you were so young when we married that I never encountered this problem."

Her laugh was breathy, perhaps a sign of nerves. But Rees wasn't going to give her the satisfaction. Any satisfaction. He just looked at her, and the giggle died on her lips. "You are still my wife" he began.

She put a hand on his arm. This was not the naive girl he'd married. Not the Helene he woke up with the day after they returned from Gretna Green, a girl who veered madly between shrieking tantrums and sullen tears. She was poised, cool, and utterly unapproachable.

"Only in name, Rees. Another woman shares your bedchamber now."

He looked over her shoulder. Fairfax-Lacy was practicing chords. He played well. Presumably she wasn't sleeping alone in her bedchamber. "A gentleman who planned to be at your side during divorce

proceedings wouldn't sit at the piano while you face an irate husband," he said, his tone polished steel.

"You are hardly an irate husband," she said, shrugging.

"I asked Stephen to remain where he is. I hardly think you are interested in making his acquaintance. And who said anything about divorce?"

"So you've taken a lover," Rees sneered, on the verge of crashing his fist into that sleek bastard's face. "What is it all in aid of, Helene?"

"Pleasure," she said, and the smile on her face burned down his spine. "My pleasure, Rees."

He turned on his heel and then back at the last second. "Who did that arrangement of Beethoven for four hands?"

"I did. I've been rearranging all of them."

He should have known that. The sonata sounded half like Beethoven and half like Helene, an odd mixture.

"Now we have that little discussion out of the way," Lady Withers said brightly, coming up from somewhere, "why don't I show you to your room, Lord Godwin? I do hope you'll make a long stay with us."

Rees turned like a cornered lion and snarled at her, then strode out of the room. As Arabella described it later to Esme, who hadn't been in the Rose Salon at the time, Earl Godwin acted precisely like the Wild Man of Deepest Africa whom Arabella had seen once in a traveling circus.

"All hair, and such a snarl, Esme!" Arabella paused, thinking about it. "Honestly, Helene, your husband is quitequite impressive." There was reluctant respect in her voice.

"Oh, Rees is very good at snarling," Helene said. She, Arabella and Esme were cozily seated in Esme's chamber, drinking tea and eating gingerbread cakes.

Esme looked up from her plate, her eyes sparkling with laughter. "The important thing is he snarled because you managed to tangle his liver or whatever that phrase is that you keep using, Helene."

"Curdle his liver," Helene repeated, and there was a growing spark of

happiness in her eyes. "He did seem chagrined by our conversation, didn't he, Lady Withers?"

"Chagrined is not the word," Arabella replied, stirring a little sugar into her tea. "He was incensed. Absolutely incensed. Purple with rage."

"I hope he's not feeling too violent," Esme said. "I can hardly have my future husband mangled by your present husband, Helene. It would all be such fodder for gossip if the servants shared what they know."

Helene thought about the difference between what the servants thought they knew about her and Stephen, and what the truth was. "I do think you could have left Stephen to me," she told Esme somewhat peevishly. "What if Rees discovers that you have claimed my lover as a future husband?"

"I doubt very much that your husband will raise the subject with Stephen," Esme replied. "Rees already announced that he will stay one day at most, so Stephen only has to briefly juggle a fiancée and a mistress. He'll not be the first to do so. I can't tell you how many times I found myself at a table that included Miles and Lady Randolph Childe. Miles always acted with the greatest finesse, and if my husband could do it, so can Stephen."

Arabella chortled. "Supper will be an interesting meal. Mr. Fairfax-Lacy will face quite a difficult task. You, Helene, wish him to impress your husband with his devotion, and you, Esme, wish to impress the marquess with Mr. Fairfax-Lacy's devotion. Hmmm, perhaps I could ask Bea to create a diversion by flirting with Earl Godwin?"

"There's no need to go as far as that," Helene said hastily. "And do you know, I have the strangest feeling that Bea might be having some feelings for Mr. Fairfax-Lacy herself? There's something odd about the way she looks at him."

Esme laughed. "That would make three of us chasing the poor man. Arabella, are you certain that you have no use for Mr. Fairfax-Lacy?"

"Quite sure, thank you, darling," Arabella said, carefully choosing a perfectly browned gingerbread. "It seems to me that the poor man must be growing tired. I dislike fatigued men. Still, it seems to be quite enlivening for him," she continued rather absently. "The man was getting hidebound. He looked so cheerful this morning. And that, of course, is your doing," she said, beaming at Helene.

Helene hid a pulse of guilt. She was hardly enlivening poor Stephen's

nights, even though the whole house believed she was. Now Esme was smiling at her too. Her sense of guilt grew larger.

"I'm very proud of Helene," Esme said. "Arabella, you can't imagine how impossibly rude Rees has been to poor Helene over the years, and she's never staged even the slightest rebellion until now."

"Now that you've rebelled," Arabella asked Helene with some curiosity, "what will be the outcome? Are you wishing to continue your relationship with Mr. Fairfax-Lacy? That is, if Esme gives up her rather dubious claim to him?"

"I wouldn't call it dubious," Esme put in. "Merely unexpected."

"No," Helene admitted. "I don't wish to remain his friend."

"I knew that," Esme said. "I watched the two of you. Otherwise, I would not have claimed him as my own future husband, I assure you, Helene."

"Stephen Fairfax-Lacy is good marriage material," Arabella said. "I am never wrong about that sort of thing. All three of my husbands were excellent spouses." She finished her gingerbread and added, meditatively, "Barring their short life spans, of course."

"I have to tell you something," Helene said rather desperately.

"I do hope you are going to tell us intimate details," Arabella said. "There's nothing more pleasurable than dissecting a man's performance in bed. I believe it's my favorite activity, perhaps even more fun than actually being in that bed." She looked faintly appalled. "I surprise myself," she said, picking up another cake. "Ah, well, that's the benefit of being an elderly person."

"You're not elderly, Aunt Arabella!" Esme said. "You're barely out of your forties."

"I'm not really bedding Mr. Fairfax-Lacy," Helene blurted out.

Arabella's mouth fell open for a second before she snapped it shut.

"I thought so," Esme said with some satisfaction. "You don't have the air of a couple besotted with each other."

Helene could feel her face reddening. "We didn't suit."

"I had that happen to me once," Arabella said. "I won't bore you with

the details, my dears, but after his third attempt, I called for a truce. A laying down of arms," she clarified with a naughty smirk. "Well, who would have thought? Fairfax-Lacy looked so"

"No!" Helene cried, horrified by the conclusion Arabella had drawn. "It truly was all my fault. I'm just not" She stopped.

To her horror, she felt tears rising to her eyes. How could she possibly admit to a failure in bedroom activity when she was seated with two of the most desirable women in the ton ?

"You know, I find him quite uninteresting as well," Esme said quickly. "It's something about the Englishness of his face. And his chest is quite narrow, isn't it? Moreover, I never liked a man with a long chin."

Helene threw Esme a watery smile. "It's not that I don't like the way he looks. I do. It's just that I found myself unable to countenance the prospect of bedding him." Her voice dropped. "He was very kind about the whole thing."

Arabella nodded. "There are always men whom one simply cannot imagine engaging in intimate circumstances. Unfortunately, I felt that way about my second husband. But what really interests me," she said, turning a piercing eye on Esme, "is what exactly you are doing, announcing your engagement to a man with an overly long chin? Or, to put the same question another way, what is Marquess Bonnington doing in this house, Esme?"

Esme almost choked on the gingerbread she was eating. "Expressing his repentance?" she said hopefully.

"Don't repeat that poppycock story that I fed your Sewing Circle!" Arabella cried. "You managed to evade my every effort at a confidential talk last night by clinging to your new fiance's arm, but now I would like to know the truth. Why has the marquess arrived in your house?"

Helene leaned forward. "I would like to know that as well, Esme. I accepted that his mother was likely here due to the circumstances of last summer, although it seemed extremely odd"

Arabella interrupted, naturally. "Odd? There's something deuced smoky about Honoratia Bonnington's arrival."

Esme sighed.

"You sound like a bellows," her aunt observed. "Out with it!"

Esme looked up at her aunt for a moment. Arabella looked as delicate and sensual as if a wisp of wind would blow her away, and yet she and the formidable Lady Bonnington were certainly forged of the same steel. So Esme told. "But I don't wish to marry anyone," she finished. "Least of all Lord Bonnington. It wouldn't be fair to Miles, or to the babe."

After a moment of stupefied silence, Arabella burst into a cackle of laughter. "Want to just keep Bonnington around for those lonely nights, do you? And you had him working in the garden during the day? Here I thought you were bent on a sober widowhood! Lord, Esme, even I never created a scandal akin to this one!"

"What scandal?" Esme demanded. "You stopped the Sewing Circle from even considering the possibility with all your quotations."

"Which took me a good hour of poring over a Bible, I'll have you know!" Arabella said.

"Esme, do you think it might be time to give up the Sewing Circle?" Helene asked tentatively. "Things are a trifle complicated in your life. Perhaps it would be best if you weren't under quite so close surveillance."

"It's part of my new respectability," Esme said stubbornly. "I rather enjoy it."

"Not that I noticed," Arabella commented. "You sewed a miserable seam. Some people are simply not gifted in that department."

"You know, Mama makes shirts for the poor," Esme said. "The whole shirt, even the collar and cuffs."

Arabella was silent for a moment. "Lord, Esme, I never like to think of myself as someone who could say ill of my own sister, but Fanny is dim-witted. She's spending all that time making up collars for people she doesn't even know, and her own daughter is alone in the country. She's got her priorities in a tangle." She reached over and gave Esme's hand a little squeeze. "Don't go changing yourself into your mother. You have always had a merry soul. But Fanny has grown into a rather dreary adult, if I say so myself."

"That's not fair," Esme objected. "Mama has had a great many disappointments in life." Obviously her daughter was foremost on the

list.

"She's dispirited," Arabella said firmly, "although it's good of you to defend her. Fanny spends all her time gazing at the world and pursing her lips. I've always been glad to have one relation with a grain of sense in her head. I can't afford to lose you to the ranks of straitlaced matrons."

"Your aunt is right," Helene put in. "I have only the slimmest acquaintance with your mother. But the idea of you growing as prim and prissy as that Mrs. Cable is simply dispiriting. She's not a very nice woman, Esme."

"I know," Esme said. "Believe me, I know."

Arabella took a look at her niece and judged it time to change the subject. But while she and Helene chatted about the Venetian lace points that adorned Helene's sleeves, Esme sat in silence. She had promised Miles that she would be a respectable mother, yet Miles was gone. She thought never to make another scandal, and she could think of no scandal with the explosive force that her marriage to Marquess Bonnington would have.

Chapter 25

A Taste for Seduction

The next morning Bea stamped down the lane to visit the goat. She'd taken to visiting the devilish creature every morning, from the pure boredom of life. Of course, she could have spent her time flirting with the Puritan. But annoyingly, irritatingly, hatefully, he and Helene were learning to play a four-handed piece. The sight of Helene's pale braids bent close to Stephen's dark head as they whacked away on that pianoforte gave Bea a strange kind of longing, the kind that pinches your heart. It wasn't an emotion that Bea was familiar with at all.

The one time they had been alone together after breakfast, for the merest moment, he had looked down at her with a rather wintry smile and said, "I gather that you have decided not to woo me?"

She had answered, "I never woo," hoping that he would kiss her or smile at her the way he did at Esme and Helene. But all he'd done was bow and walk away. Bea had realized in that very moment, watching his back, that there was nothing in the world she wanted more than to woo the man. But Stephen showed little desire to secure any sort of relationship with her. How could he, in truth? He had no time. When he wasn't playing an instrument with his mistress, he was exchanging bawdy jests with his fiancée. Lord knows where he was at night. Bea ground her teeth together. She was making a regular occupation out of thinking about Stephen Fairfax-Lacy and then admonishing herself for doing it. She held out a branch she'd brought the goat and watched him chew it into kindling.

In fact, Lady Beatrix Lennox was suffering from a mighty loss of confidence. First Mr. Fairfax-Lacy had refused her as a mistress and taken Helene instead. And Marquess Bonnington hadn't shown the faintest interest in her from the very beginning. Bea had to blink very hard to hold back tears.

The goat was chewing so loudly that it was no surprise that Bea didn't hear anyone approaching her. "Aren't you afraid to approach that spencer-eating beast?" said a voice at her ear.

She was like some sort of trained dog, Bea thought miserably. All she had to do was hear his voice and her knees weakened.

"The goat doesn't bother me," she said, not turning to look at him. What was the point? He was leaning on the stile next to her, seemingly unperturbed by her graceless welcome.

"We should introduce the rest of the party to this fascinating creature," he said idly. "I don't believe that Esme even knows of his existence. Whereas I find myself compulsively visiting the beast every day."

Bea's heart hardened. "I thought you and Lady Godwin were spending your time together," she said, being deliberately rude. "Or is it Lady Rawlings who occupies more of your time?"

"Not every moment. And never tell me that you're jealous." His voice took on that dark, sweet note that drove Bea to distraction.

"Absolutely not!" she said, turning and facing him for the first time. He wasHe wasn't so fabulously handsome. He had wrinkles on the edges of his eyes. And his chin was too long. God, how she hated a long chin!

"I'm glad," Stephen said. She couldn't read his eyes. Was he making fun of her? No, that was a look of concern. Damn it all.

"Because Esme and I" He hesitated.

"You needn't tell me," Bea put in. "I can see the truth for myself. And I assure you that I haven't the slightest feeling about it except happiness for the two of you."

"I'm glad to hear that." It was so unfair that his smile could make her stomach clench. Long chin, long chin, long chin, she thought to herself.

"Esme and I seem to have so many interests in common." Apparently he was feeling quite chatty now that he'd cleared away any misconceptions Bea might have had. "I had forgotten how much I enjoy word play and jests."

"Lovely," Bea said listlessly. She had been routed by a fleshy woman nine months with child. The fact that Bea genuinely liked Esme (and Helene, for that matter) didn't help.

Stephen looked aside at his little Bea. Unless he was quite mistaken, his campaign was working. She was lurid with jealousy. "Do you enjoy jests?" he asked.

Apparently she was supposed to engage in a contest of bawdy jests in order to obtain the great honor of being yet another woman in Mr. Fairfax-Lacy's life. Of course she wouldn't do such an ignominious thing. "I know a few," she said, despite her best intentions. "Do you know the ballad that begins: 'He's lain like a log of wood, in bed for a year or two, and won't afford me any good, he nothing at all would do?' There are quite a few verses."

He laughed. "Perhaps men don't care to repeat that particular ballad amongst themselves." His eyes warmed her to her stomach, sent pangs of warning to her heart.

"I am thinking of returning to London, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy," Bea said, making up her mind on the spot. "I must visit my mantua-maker. After all, my favorite garment was eaten by this animal." The goat rolled his eyes at her.

"Oh," he said. And then, "Are you then determined not to woo?"

"How many times must you ask me?" Bea snapped. The arrogance of

the man was incredible. Incredible! Bea peeked a look at him from under her lashes. He looked almostwellanxious.

"My besetting sin is arrogance, it would seem," he said. "Although I had not realized it until recently. I truly apologize if I misinterpreted your interest in me when we played billiards together."

"No, you didn't!" she wanted to shriek. Why wasn't he wooing her? Why wasn't he trying to seduce her ?

She peeked another look. It was no use. He had the longest chin in Christendom, perhaps, but she wanted to kiss him desperately. Or rather, she wanted to be kissed by him. And it seemed that there was still a chance, before Esme scooped him into a forty-year waltz. But she couldn't quite bring herself to give him one of her seductive looks. She was feeling paralyzingly shy, and there they were in front of the goat, and

"I'll think about it," she mumbled.

"What? I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch what you said." He was leaning slightly against the fence. He looked like the most respectable, prudish, Puritan in the world. Not her sort at all. Too old, for one thing. And too opinionated. And tootoo desirable.

"I said, I'll decide today whether I wish to woo you," she said painstakingly.

"Oh, good."

The infuriating man acted as if they were discussing a trip to see a Roman monument. Bea couldn't think of anything else they had to say to each other, so she made her farewell and then walked listlessly up the lane, swinging her parasol at a rock with the misfortune to be in her way. It was only in front of him that she pretended there was a decision to be made: and that was merely because of an instinctive feminine wish to protect herself.

Tonight she would spent an hour bathing, two hours dressing, and even longer painting her face, and she would seduce that man, by God, if he were seducable.

Chapter 26

The Experience That Divides the Ladies from the Women

Esme stared out the window of the drawing room. They were having a late spring flurry of snow. The white flakes were making the yellow crocuses on the side of the house look pale and betrayed. Or perhaps it was she who was betrayed. Or was it she who was betraying?

The comedy of errors that made up this particular house party was astonishing. She and Mr. Fairfax-Lacy, to all eyes, were apparently planning to marry. Equally well known to all was the fact that Helene was having an affair with the said Mr. Fairfax-Lacy, although it didn't seem to have given Helene's husband even a qualm. The earl was leaving the next morning, but as far as Esme could determine, he was thoroughly enjoying bickering with Helene over her reformulations of Beethoven and had paid no attention whatsoever to Stephen Fairfax-Lacy's lavish compliments to his wife.

Today the pain in her lower back was even worse than usual. She could hardly stand up, it hurt so much. The door opened behind her.

"Hello," she said, not bothering to look around. It was amazing how closely her ears were attuned to the sound of his step, rather than those of the other two dozen persons thronging her house. He stood just behind her and, without even being asked, pressed his thumbs sharply into the base of her spine. It felt so good that Esme's knees almost collapsed.

"Steady there," he said. "How is that babe this morning?"

"I received a letter from my mother," Esme said, turning around and looking up at him. "Fanny is coming to visit, thanks to your mother's persuasive powers. Much though I loath it, I am going to have to express gratitude to Marchioness Bonnington."

Sebastian narrowed his eyes. Didn't Esme have any idea why his mother would have done such an act of benevolence? "My mother didn't do it out of the kindness of her heart," he pointed out.

"I know, I know." The smile that spread across her face was genuine. "But I am glad that Mama is coming. It must be because I'm having a child myself. And because Miles is dead, of course."

Of course, Sebastian thought cynically. He was getting sick of Esme

referring to her husband as if he'd ever played a significant role in her life.

"Don't you see that your mother is coming here solely to ensure that you do indeed marry Fairfax-Lacy?" he asked harshly. "Once you disappoint her again, she'll drop you like a hot potato."

"There's always the small chance that I won't disappoint her," Esme replied icily.

Sebastian snorted. "Your mother is the sort of woman who would find something to criticize if you had taken on a nun's habit."

"I mean to be respectable, and I shall be," Esme said. But her heart wasn't in the argument: her back hurt too much.

"You are pretending not to be in love with me. You're a hypocrite, Esme, and you're making a terrible mistake."

"I don't feel very well," Esme mumbled. It wasn't only because she didn't want to think about Sebastian's offensive comment. Her back hurt so much that she seemed to be hearing his voice through a fog, as if filtered through cotton wool. "Perhaps I ought to go to my chambers."

At that moment the door opened and a flood of chatting houseguests swept in. Lady Bonnington took one look at Esme and announced, "I do believe Lady Rawlings is having that baby now."

"Well, you've done this sort of thing before," Arabella said to her with a tone of mild panic. "Tell the poor girl what to do."

"Don't be more of an idiot than nature made you!" Lady Bonnington snapped. "Obviously she needs to retire to her bedchamber."

"I see no occasion for rudeness," Arabella replied, bristling.

Esme took a deep breath. She was surrounded by a ring of faces. A second later Arabella was pushed to the side, and Sebastian bent over Esme.

"Up you go," he said to her, with a tone of unmistakable intimacy. Before she could protest, he picked Esme up in his arms and started carrying her up the stairs, looking for all the world as if he knew directly where he was going.

"Oh!" Esme gripped his arm as her entire body shuddered and seemingly attempted to turn itself inside out. She dug her fingernails into his arm.

"Call the midwife!" Sebastian yelled over his shoulder. A moment later he had her in one of the spare bedrooms, on a bed specially prepared for just this occasion. But Esme didn't let him put her down.

"Wait!" she gasped. He started to lower her to the bed. "Wait, damn it!" She hung on for dear life as another wave swept through her body. Just then the door popped open, and in streamed Arabella, Helene, Marchioness Bonnington, and three maids.

"All right, Bonnington," Arabella said importantly. "If you could just put my niece on the bed, we'll carry on from here. The midwife will be here directly; the silly woman had taken a walk to the village. Just try to keep that baby where it is until she arrives, all right, Esme?"

"Don't be a widgeon!" Lady Bonnington said, marching over to the side of the bed. "The babe will not arrive for hours."

"God, I hope that's not the case," Esme gasped.

"That's the way of it," the marchioness said. Her tone was not unsympathetic.

Esme let go of Sebastian's hand. He bent over her for a moment, pressed a kiss on her forehead, and then he was gone. She felt a bit like crying, except another pain rushed up from her toes and stole her attention away. "Bloody hell," Esme said in a near shout, reaching out and grabbing Arabella's hand. The pain receded, and she flopped back on the bed, drained.

"Profanity will not ease the pain," Lady Bonnington observed. "My own mother told me that what distinguishes a lady from a lower being is that a lady accepts pain without rebuke."

Esme ignored her. "How many of these pains will there be?" she demanded of the midwife as she entered the room.

Mrs. Pluck was a thick-set woman who was cheerfully confident about the "course of nature," as she called it. "I expect you're in some discomfort," she said, bustling about with a stack of towels. "But you've got the hips for a quick one." She chuckled in a wheezing sort of way. "We must let nature take its course, that's what I say."

"My niece will dispatch this business with with dispatch ," Arabella announced, surreptitiously examining the red patches on her hand where Esme had squeezed her. "Bring me a wet cloth," she snapped at one of the maids. "Esme, darling, you're rather unbecomingly flushed. I'll just bathe your forehead."

"Took me all of six hours," Lady Bonnington trumpeted.

Esme immediately decided that she was going to birth her baby in less than six hours. She'd never survive an ordeal as long as that. "Oh no," she moaned. "Here it comes again."

Arabella hastily dropped her wet cloth, and Esme grabbed her hand. The tidal wave came, swept her down and under, cast her up gasping for air. "I don't like this," Esme managed to say in a husky whisper.

"Never knew a woman who did!" the marchioness said cheerfully from the side of the bed. "All a lady can do is endure with fortitude, showing her well-bred nature in every moment."

Esme responded with flat profanity.

As the marchioness thought later, if she hadn't already known that Esme Rawlings was an appallingly ill-bred woman, she would have known from that moment on. The gel just had no idea how a lady behaved under duress.

Chapter 27

Sweet William

Giving birth in the presence of two elderly ladies of the ton was without a doubt the most uncomfortable experience of Esme's life. Arabella stood at her right, bathing her forehead every time one of the pains ended. Esme emerged from a swooping black wave of pain to find that Lady Bonnington, standing to her left, was exhorting her to greater efforts, and Arabella, not to be outdone, was instructing the midwife to hurry things along.

"There's no need to hurry things along," Mrs. Pluck, the midwife, responded with a glimmer of irritation. "The course of nature will do

it. And Lady Rawlings has the hips for it, that she does."

"A little less conversation about my niece's hips, if you please," Arabella snapped. "There's no need to be vulgar."

"Arabella, you're a fool," Lady Bonnington announced with her usual politeness.

Esme took a breath, feeling the pain coming again. It was worse than she had ever imagined, rather like being scalded from the toes up. She struggled her way back out of the pain a moment later, dimly hearing Arabella's congratulations. Her aunt seemed to have decided that Esme needed applause after every contraction. And Esme definitely agreed with her. "Where where's Helene?" she gasped at one point.

Lady Bonnington looked shocked. "Naturally, we sent her out of the room. The poor girl hasn't had a babe of her own, you know. This is enough to put her off for life."

"Oh no," Esme moaned. The next contraction was coming, sweeping up from her toes

"Fortitude, darling, fortitude!" Arabella said, taking her hand even more firmly. Esme clutched her hand.

"You've got the hips for it," Mrs. Pluck said from the bottom of the bed. And then, "We're almost there, my lady. I told you this would be a ride in the park, didn't I?"

A ride in the park it wasn't. But Esme couldn't summon up the breath to argue the point. Instead she let the pain wrench her bones from their sockets, or so it felt. Arabella was alternating between putting a cool cloth on Esme's head and wrapping it around her own hand.

"All right, my lady," Mrs. Pluck said loudly. "Time to bring the little master into the world."

Or daughter, Esme thought, although she couldn't summon up the wherewithal to say so. But Mrs. Pluck was right.

Squealing, indignant, fat and belligerent, William Rawlings entered the world in a burst of rage. Esme propped herself on her elbows. There he was: dark red from pure anger, kicking jerkily, waving his fists in the air. Her heart turned over with a thump. "Oh, give him to me," she cried, pushing herself into a half seated position and reaching out.

"He'll need a good bath, and after that I will check all his toes and make certain that he is presentable," Mrs. Pluck replied, handing the baby to the waiting nursemaid.

"He seems to be a boy," Arabella said, ogling the baby. "My goodness, Esme. He's remarkably well endowed!" She giggled. "It looks as if he has two turnips between his legs."

"They're all like that," Lady Bonnington said with a tinge of nostalgia in her voice. "My son was just the same. I thought he was going to be a satyr."

"Just a minute, my lady," Mrs. Pluck said. "Just one little push now."

A few minutes later, Esme hoisted herself into a sitting position. "I'd like to hold my son, please," she said hoarsely. "Pleasenow!"

Mrs. Pluck looked up. "Everything in good time, my lady. After we"

Arabella reached over and snatched the baby out of the nursemaid's arms. "Lady Rawlings wants to hold her son." She put him, rather awkwardly, in Esme's arms. He was still howling, fat little legs jerking out of the blanket.

"This isn't wise," Mrs. Pluck scolded. "It's best if the baby is washed within the first five minutes of its birth. Cleanliness is essential to good health."

"There's time for many a bath in his future," Arabella said, bending over the bed. "He's so plumpy, isn't he, Esme? And look at his gorgeous little toes!"

Esme had never felt anything quite like it. It was as if the world had narrowed to a pinhole, the size of herself and the baby. He was so beautiful that her heart sang with it. And yet he was remarkably homely as well. "Why is his face so red?" she asked. "And why is his head this peculiar shape?"

"The course of nature," Mrs. Pluck answered importantly. "They all look like that. Now you'll have to give up the baby, my lady. We have just a few more things to do here."

But the baby had decided to open his eyes. Esme clutched him closer. "Hello there," she whispered. "Hello, love." He blinked and closed his mouth. His eyes were the pale blue of the sky on a very early morning, and he looked up at her, quite as if he were memorizing her

face. "I know you think you're smiling at me," Esme told him, kissing his nose and his forehead and his fat little cheeks. "You just forgot to smile, didn't you, sweet William?"

"Are you naming him William?" Lady Bonnington asked. "I suppose that must be an old name in Lord Rawlings's familyhis father, you know," she told the nursemaid, who looked blank.

William's eyes were sweet and solemn, trusting Esme to keep him safe, trusting her to nourish and protect him. For years and years to come. A chill of fear fell on Esme's heart. Benjamin, her own little baby brother, had died. Of course, it wasn't the same, but sweet William was so enchantingly dear. He frowned a little as a drop fell on his cheek.

"What is it, darling?" Arabella asked. "Oh no, the baby's getting wet. Shall I take him?"

"He's the most beautiful baby I ever saw," Esme said, hiccupping. "I love him so much. But he's so little! What if something happens to him? I couldn't bear it!"

"She's having some sort of reaction to the birth," Lady Bonnington observed. "Takes some women that way. My second cousin twice removed went into a decline after her daughter was born. Mind you, that husband of hers was enough to send anyone into a decline."

Esme swallowed and dried her eyes on the sheet. "He has Miles's eyes," she said to Arabella, ignoring the marchioness. "See?" She turned William toward Arabella. "They have just that sweetness that Miles had. Miles's eyes were that same blue. And Miles is dead ."

"But his son isn't," Arabella said, smiling down at her. "William is a fine, sturdy baby, with nothing fragile about him."

"I agree," Lady Bonnington said promptly. "I knew immediately that the baby was the image of your husband."

Arabella threw her a look of potent dislike. "Why don't you go transmit this happy news to your son, Honoratia?"

"I shall," the marchioness said, "I shall. And may I say, Lady Rawlings, that I am impressed by your handling of this entire delicate matter?"

Whether Lady Bonnington meant to refer to the process of giving birth, or that of identifying Esme's child's father, no one could tell.

Mrs. Pluck took the baby, who promptly started crying again.

"He wants to be with me," Esme said, struggling to sit upright.

"He has a good healthy voice," Mrs. Pluck said, handing him to the wet nurse. "But the course of nature must take its course, my lady," she said, rather obscurely.

Helene had come in and was peering at the baby as the wet nurse wrapped him in a warm cloth. "Oh, Esme, he's absolutely lovely," she said.

"Does he look healthy to you?" Esme asked the nursemaid.

"Fat as a suckling pig," the wet nurse said promptly. "Now shall we see if he'd like some breakfast?"

She sat down and pulled open the neck of her gown. Esme watched as William turned to the nurse and made a little grunting noise. He had those great blue eyes open, and he was looking up at the nursemaid. From Esme's point of view, it looked as if he were giving the woman the very same blinking, thoughtful glance he had given her.

White-hot jealousy stabbed her in the chest. That was her baby, her own sweet William. "Give him to me!" she said sharply.

The wet nurse looked up, confused. She had William's head in position and was about to offer him her breast.

"Don't you dare nurse my baby!" Esme said, her hands instinctively clenched into fists. "Give me William this instant!"

"Well, my goodness," the wet nurse said. "You hired me, my lady."

"I changed my mind," Esme snapped. She was not going to have William think that anyone else was his mother. She would do everything for him that needed to be done, including feeding.

The wet nurse pursed her lips, but she brought over the child. "It doesn't come easily, nursing a child," she said. "It's quite painful at the beginning, and there's many a woman who can't master the art of it. And ladies don't have the breasts for it, to tell the truth."

"I have the breasts for it," Esme said with all the authority she could command. "Now, if you'll just tell us how to do this, I'd like to give William his breakfast."

"If you don't mind my being blunt," Lady Bonnington announced, "that very idea makes me feel squeamish. A lady is more than a milch cow, Lady Rawlings!"

"Oh do go on, Honoratia," Arabella said impatiently. "Don't you have something important to tell your son?"

Lady Bonnington left the bedchamber feeling a bit piqued. After all, Lady Rawlings was no relative of hers, and yet there she'd stayed, for all of three hours, counseling her to greater efforts. It was quite likely due to her efforts that Lady Rawlings had managed to get through the birth so quickly. But, on the other hand, she couldn't have hoped for a better outcome. Lady Rawlings herself had identified the child's father, and that was all there was to it. Sebastian would have to acknowledge himself free of responsibility now.

"He doesn't look a bit like you," the marchioness told her son with more than a twinge of satisfaction. "He's bald as a belfry, just like his father."

"Miles Rawlings had hair until a few years ago," Sebastian pointed out.

"You wait until you see that child," his mother said, rather gleefully. "He's the image of his father. You needn't feel a moment's anxiety about whether you have a responsibility to him. You haven't. Lady Rawlings started weeping the moment she saw him, because the child has her husband's eyes. There's no doubt about it. Miles Rawlings has a posthumous son."

Lady Bonnington paused and looked at her son. He seemed a little pale. "You're free," she said, rather more gently.

He looked at her, and the expression in his eyes shocked her to the toes. "I don't suppose she asked for me?"

"No," his mother said, shaken. "No, she didn't."

She bit her lip as Sebastian turned about without another word and walked from the room. Could it be that he was more entangled with this woman than she thought? No.

But it seemed that she had underestimated the amount to which Sebastian had hoped the child would be his own. I'll have to get the boy married off as soon as possible, the marchioness decided. To a girl from a large family, a woman who wouldn't be loathe to have more than one child herself. Although if my future daughter-in-law shows

the faintest interest in turning herself into a milk cow, I'll have to set her straight.

There are some things that would never happen in the Bonnington family. And that sort of ludicrously ill bred behavior was one of them.

Chapter 28

In the Library

Beatrix Lennox had made up her mind. She had dilly-dallied enough over the question of Stephen Fairfax-Lacy. In fact, she had given him far too much importance in her life. She had never had the faintest wish to invite a man to her bed twice; actually inviting one into her chamber was the best way she knew of to utterly blot out any future desire for his company.

Dressing to seduce Stephen took her all afternoon. At the end, she was certain that she was utterly delectable. She was scented and polished and curled and colored every inch of her. She wore no corset, and no cotton padding; instead she chose a gown that offered everything she had to the world in a burst of pagan enthusiasm. It was of French silk, shaded in a subdued blue-green color that turned her hair to flame. It was daringly low, and ornamented with ribbons of a slightly darker shade. There were very few covers at the table for dinner, of course. Esme apparently would not even rise from her bed for a matter of days or weeks. Bea paid Stephen almost no attention during the meal, allowing him to flirt as he wished with Helene while Earl Godwin watched with a sardonic expression. She had no wish to engage in a noticeable competition with Helene. After all, just the previous evening Helene had lavishly thanked Bea for her help in gaining Stephen's friendship. She would likely be somewhat startled if Bea snatched him back before her very eyes.

When she sauntered into the salon after supper, the earl and countess were, naturally enough, already hammering away at the piano. Stephen's eyes darkened when he registered her gown. No matter how censorious the man might be about her face painting, he liked that dress. There wasn't a man alive who wouldn't like it.

"You look delicious!" Arabella cried, holding out her hands. "Trust my

own Bea to keep us from falling into country doldrums. If we spend too much time here, we're likely to stop dressing for dinner at all!"

Bea gave a faint shudder. The idea of wearing the same clothing through an entire day was intolerable.

"Bea," Helene called, looking up from the piano, "would you very much mind trying my waltz again? I would like to demonstrate it to Rees."

Perfect.

Bea turned around to find that Stephen was already at her side. His eyes were almost black, and she felt a surge of female triumph. Why shouldn't she woo if she wanted? Men had their way far too often in life, as it was. She dropped into a low curtsy, putting out her hand to Stephen. He bowed and straightened, kissing her hand. Then he paused for one second, gazing at her arm. Bea looked down. There was nothing odd about her arm. "Are you quite all right?" she asked.

"I had a sudden recollection of dancing with a young lady who shall remain unnamed," he said. "She left marks of white powder all over my coat."

Bea raised an eyebrow. "This white is all my own."

Their eyes caught for a second, and she let her smile tell him that the rest of her was just as white, and just as unpowdered.

Then the music began. Helene had curbed the waltz's frenzied pace somewhat. It still rollicked, though. Bea was shivering with excitement. Now that she'd finally got herself to this point, she couldn't imagine why she'd ever wasted the previous fortnight thinking about it. Wooing—wooing was like breathing, for her. Why hadn't she seen that? She smiled at him and let just a hint of the desire that was pounding through her body show. Just a hint.

He didn't respond, which was a little disappointing. All he did was swirl her into another series of long circles that carried them down the long length of the Rose Salon. Bea couldn't help it; the very feeling of his hand on her waist made her feel greedy. She edged closer. He seemed to push her away. Her heart was beating so fast that she could hardly hear the music.

"Have you joined the adoring hordes in the nursery?" Stephen asked.

And what would be the point of that ? Bea wanted to shriek. Ladies such as herself never had children! They had men not babies. She didn't want one anyway. William looked like a buttery little blob to her. The moment she peered at him, he started to cry, and the very sound put her teeth on edge. "I'm not very maternal," she said.

Stephen drew her into a sweeping circle. "I don't seem to be developing a paternal side either," he said, once they were straight again. "Helene is agog over that child."

Bea didn't want to talk about Helene. She had to get this done. "Mr. Fairfax-Lacy," she said, and stopped.

He bent his head, that dark head that was so beautifully shaped. "Yes?"

"If you would join me in the library, I should like to discuss a poem with you."

His eyes were inscrutable. Yet surely he knew what she was saying! He'd told her to woo, after all. She managed to smile, but it was hardly a seductive triumph. Then she just waited, heart in her throat.

"I would very much like to finish reading you a poem," she said steadily, when he didn't respond.

He raised an eyebrow. He looked ages older and more worldly than she. Perhaps he didn't feel the same sort of ravishing longing that she did, "The Barnfield poem," she clarified.

"Ah."

So when the waltz was over, she bid everyone good night and left the Rose Salon. She didn't look to see whether he followed. Because if he didn't follow, she was going to cry, and then she was going to pretend that none of this had ever happened. In fact, she'd probably go to London the next morning and stay with friends.

But he did follow.

She walked into the library, Stephen behind her. He was mesmerized by the way Bea's hips swayed. It seemed to promise everything, that little swing and sway. "Did you practice that walk?" he asked, lighting the lamp with a candle from the mantelpiece. He had the oddest feeling of disappointment. She had invited him to an impromptu seduction. What else had he expected when he'd told her to woo? She

was, after all, just what she appeared to be: remarkably available.

He turned around and she was smiling, nestled into the arm of a high-backed settee like a wanton. "What do you think?"

"I think you're too damned practiced," he said bluntly.

Her smile disappeared, and there was something uncertain in her eyes. Almost diffident. He walked over. "You needn't look like a little girl denied a sweet. You can have any man you please."

"At the moment, I would like you." Trust Bea to go straight to the point.

Her hair had the sheen of a feverish rose. Stephen had never felt anything like the lust he had at the moment. And yet every civilized bone he had in his body fought it. She was a young, unmarried woman. He didn't succumb to such wiles. In fact, he realized with an almost visible start, he'd never been seduced. He had only seduced. It was a great deal more uncomfortable the other way around.

She turned from him and picked up the small leather book on the table. "Shall I start with the poem which gave everyone so much excitement?" she asked. There was a satin thread in her voice that made Stephen's entire body stiffen.

O would to God (so I might have my fee)

My lips were Honey, and thy mouth a Bee.

He couldn't stop himself. He drifted over to the settee. His will was strong enough that he didn't sit down, but he found himself leaning over the tall back, standing just at her shoulder. She looked up at him, a sparkling glance, and he found to his torment that this position merely gave him an excellent view of her breasts. They were a perfect white that had nothing to do with powder, not that snowy perfection.

Then shouldst thou sucke my sweete

and my faire flower

That now is ripe, and full of honey-berries

Stephen could just make out the outline of Bea's nipples, puckered under the frail silk of her bodice. He gave in, reached a hand over her shoulder, and wantonly, deliberately, took one of her breasts in his hand. There was a gasp, and she stopped reading.

But she didn't jump away or protest. That was disappointing too. What a fool I am, he thought. Why not just enjoy what is being offered?

Her breast was perfect. Somehow he'd thought it would be larger, fleshier. But it was flawlessly tender, an unsteady weight in his fingers.

" ' Full of honey-berries, ' " he prompted. His voice was rough and unsteady. He supposed dimly that her other lovers had been more debonair, probably, less

He couldn't pretend this was normal behavior for him. Or normal desire, for that matter.

" ' Then would I leade thee to my pleasant Bower, ' " she said, and the quaver had moved from his to her voice. " ' Filled full of grapes, of mulberries and cherries. Then shouldst thou be my Wasp, or else my Bee, I would be thy hive, and thou my honey bee. ' "

He brought his other arm around her neck and took both breasts in his hands. She moaned, a throaty little sound, and dropped the book, arching her head back into the curve of his neck. He let his mouth play along her cheek. She smelled like lemons, clean and sweet, an English smell. Her ear was small and neatly placed against her head. In fact, her ear was like the rest of her: small, perfectly shaped, rounded, beautiful. He nipped it in anguish. Why did she have to be so so beautiful and so available?

Her arms were tangling in his hair, pulling his head closer to her mouth. The small gasps that fell from her lips didn't seem practiced. They sounded wrenched from her throat. God knows the hoarse sounds he kept swallowing were wrenched from his own chest.

Her breasts seemed to swell in his hands, and he hadn't even allowed himself to move his hands. "Bea." His voice was hoarse and embarrassingly gruff. It sounded like an old man's voice.

This time he managed to speak clearly. "Bea, we cannot do this."

Her eyes closed, and her arms fell from his hair. He lifted his hands from her breasts what if someone walked into the library? He waited a

second, but she didn't open her eyes.

"Bea?" he asked. He was standing straight now, as straight as possible given the strain in his pantaloons.

"You may leave," she said. She didn't open her eyes.

"What?"

"I'm going to sit here and pretend that you aren't a stick-in-the-mud Puritan," she said. "I'm going to pretend that you actually had the courtesy to go through with the invitation that you ordered me to issue, if I remember correctly. Or is it a lack of guts that's the issue?"

"That's incredibly vulgar," he said slowly.

She opened her eyes. "Mr. Fairfax-Lacy, listen to me carefully."

She seemed to be waiting for a response, so he nodded curtly.

"I can be far more vulgar than this. I am a vulgar woman, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy." Her eyes were flashing, for all her voice was even. She was in a rage, and Stephen didn't know why that would make him feel better, but it did.

"Look at this, Mr. Puritan-Lacy!" she said, grabbing her bodice and pulling it down. Two perfectly shaped breasts, satin smooth, white velvet, fell free of her bodice. "I-am-a-vulgar-woman," she said, emphasizing every word. "I am the sort of woman who allows herself to be handled in the library by"

He was at her side. "No, you are not." His voice was dry, authoritative and utterly commanding. In one split second he hauled her bodice so high over her breasts that it almost touched her collarbone.

She narrowed her eyes. "How dare you say what I am or am not?"

"I know you," he said calmly, although his hands were shaking. "You are no vulgar woman, Bea."

"Well," she said, obviously about to rush into a hundred examples, but he stopped her with a kiss. They drank each other as if manna had fallen between them, as if kisses were the bread of life.

"You're worse," he said against her lips, a moment later. He felt them curve beneath his mouth, and he wanted her so fiercely that his entire body throbbed. "It must be tiring being so much worse than vulgar

day and night."

She could not answer because his lips were crushing hers. And somehow his hands were back at her breasts. He brushed her nipple through the silk of her bodice, and she gasped.

"These must be your honey-berries ," he said in her ear.

"That's so vulgar," she said, a hint of laughter in her voice.

He yanked down her bodice, the mere inch that kept her nipple from the evening air, and flicked his tongue over it. She stiffened and clutched his shoulders so hard that he would likely have bruises. He did it again. And again.

"Stephen," she whispered. Her voice didn't sound so practiced now. It was ragged and hoarse.

Finally his mouth closed over her breast. She arched against him, shaking all over. He felt a stab of pure arrogance. She may have slept with other men, but he couldn't believe that she reacted to them like this.

Of course, that's exactly what every other man thought.

"I want to be courted ," he said fiercely.

"What's the difference?" she said. She sounded genuinely perplexed.

"I am not wooing you at this moment," Stephen said. "I am seducing you." He ran a hand up her leg, past the sleek silk stocking and the slight bump of her garter. "You need to learn the difference, Bea." His voice was rough with lust. His fingers trembled as they danced over the skin of her inner thighs, closer, closer

She reached forward, pulling his hair toward her. "Kiss me!" she said, and her voice had an unsteadiness that sent his blood in a dizzying swirl.

So he kissed her, took her mouth with an untamed exuberance, at the very moment his fingers slipped into her warmth, pressed up and in with a strength that made her arch helplessly against him. She was ripe and plump, and it took every bit of strength he had to let his fingers drift where his body longed to be. To drive her mad, make her shudder under his hand even as he drank her cries with his mouth.

"This is seduction," he said to her, and his voice was raw with it.

He could feel the coil in her, feel the tension growing. She was so beautiful, trembling in his arms, coming closer and closer

"Would you do this for me?" he said fiercely.

Her eyes opened. They were magnificent, drenched, beautiful "Of course!" she choked. She reached out for him. "Please"

"It's seduction."

"It's glorious."

He made his fingers still, just stay there, in the melting warmth. Then just as she was about to stir, he moved again. She gasped, and her body jerked against his. He stopped. And then pressed hard again.

"Stephen, don't!" she cried.

"Don't? Don't?" He let his fingers take a rhythm then. And allowed himself, finally, to return to her lips, beautiful dark and swollen, not with false colors but with kisses.

She was writhing against him now, panting little bursts of air, a scream building in her he could feel it, could feel an answering shout in his own chest, a desperate longing

She shuddered all over and clutched his shoulders so hard that he could feel her fingernails bite into his flesh, even through his coat.

And then she was pliant in his arms, a sweet, curved womanly body. He whispered into her hair. "That was a seduction, Bea."

There was silence in the library, and then she said, "I think I guessed that. At some point." The thread of laughter in her voice would always be part of living with Bea.

She didn't pull away from him, though. She stayed, nestled into his arm like a dove. He had to leave the room or he'd lose his resolve. Stephen had the sense he was fighting the greatest battle of his life: his own Enclosure Act. He had to enclose her, keep her, marry her.

And he had to make her understand that.

"I want more from you," he said into her ear.

She opened her eyes rather drowsily and smiled at him. His blood licked like fire at the look in them. "I'm amenable," she said sleekly.

"You don't know what I want," he pointed out.

She blinked. "Couldn't you teach me?"

"I want to be courted, Bea." He watched her carefully. "Not seduced, wooed ."

"Do I have to consult a dictionary?"

"I hope not. May I escort you to your chamber?"

She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his life, with her hair tumbling over her shoulders and a faint rosy color high in her cheeks. It took every bit of self-control he had in his body to leave her at her bedchamber door. But he was playing for keeps.

Chapter 29

Spousal Relations

Candles were being snuffed in bedchambers all over the house. Rooms were sinking into darkness, into the pleasant intimacy that welcomes a lover's step, a silent kiss, a whispered invitation. But Rees Holland, Earl Godwin, was hardly in a loverlike mood. He stared at the door to his bedchamber, grimly awaiting

His wife.

And wasn't that an irony? That he should feel such a revulsion of feeling, such a disinclination to even speak to the woman, that he felt like dashing out of the house and saddling a horse on the moment? But there it was. She was a viper, Helene was. She could say the merest thing to him, and it would sting to the bottom of his soul for days.

And yet he told himself again he only wanted the best for her. Fairfax-Lacy wasn't a man to stand by her during a divorce. "Twould ruin his career, for one thing. She was infatuated with the man, he could tell

that. But it wouldn't last. Fairfax-Lacy was naught more than a smooth-talking politician, a silver-tongued devil, as his grandmother would have said. He didn't look at her with much desire, either. Rees had caught Fairfax-Lacy looking at Beatrix Lennox with real interest in his eyes.

That was the crux of it. He himself had been a damned failure as a husband to Helene. Not that she'd been any good as a wife. But presumably she was bedding Fairfax-Lacy, so perhaps it was only with him that she felt so—revolted. It was amazing to find that it still stung, years later. Even now, when he saw her, he had the impulse to put on a cravat, to cover any stray chest hair that might show. Because it disgusted her. She had said that again and again. Hairy beast, that he was.

Rees grimaced. What the hell was he even worrying about her for? She was a sharp-tongued little devil. Except he couldn't let her make the same mistake again. She needed to find a husband who'd be true to her this time. And Fairfax-Lacy wasn't the one. Not with the liquorish way he glanced at Lady Beatrix when no one was looking. He never looked at Helene that way. Oh, he was wooing her: teasing her with extravagant compliments about her moonlit hair and other such blather. But he didn't look at her with that smoky longing that a man looks at a woman he wants to bed. Can't bear not to bed, in fact.

And yet she was obviously planning to ask for a divorce. Presumably Mr. M.P. thought he could get an Act of Parliament allowing her to remarry. But if Helene married Fairfax-Lacy, she'd find herself with yet another unfaithful husband. He, Rees, had allowed her to go her own way and find a consort of her own. He'd given her her own life back. But Mr. Proper Fairfax-Lacy would never do that. No, he would dally with strumpets on the side, embarrass-ing Helene in public and private, but he'd never give her freedom to do the same.

There was a scratching on the door, and it silently swung open. Rees marveled for a moment: the doors in Lady Rawlings's house seemed to have been greased, they moved so quietly.

Helene looked rather like a silvery ghost. She was muffled up in a thick dressing gown, looking as drearily proper as any matron in all England. Rees had to admit that he was rather glad she had found a consort. The burden of being the only adulterous one in their marriage was exhausting for his conscience.

"Forgive me for my informal attire," she told him. Her voice was cool,

with just the faintest edge that told him that she expected him to be rude. Vulgar, even. She always thought he was vulgar.

So he bowed and settled her in a chair with all the manners he could summon to mind.

"I've come to ask for a divorce," she said abruptly, "but I'm sure you've guessed that."

"Has Mr. Fairfax-Lacy agreed to exposure as your consort?" Perhaps the skepticism in his tone was audible. "He will allow me to sue him for adultery?"

But she was shaking her head, perfectly calmly. "Oh, no, that might infringe upon his career. Stephen has a very important role in the government, in the life of the nation. We'll simply have to hire some man to stand in his place."

Rees didn't have to think hard to know that a writer of comic operas wasn't considered important to the life of the nation. "Shouldn't Fairfax-Lacy be in session at this very moment, if he's so vital?" he asked.

"Stephen is quite, quite exhausted by the ordeals of a recent parliamentary debate," Helene said, waving her hand in the air.

Rees thought sourly about exhausted men and their proclivities to entertain themselves with other people's wives. "Ah, exhausted. I see."

"You wouldn't understand, Rees. Stephen has a critical role in the House. He just finished orchestrating a tremendous battle against an Enclosure Act. That's when a rich man fences in land that was originally openly used for grazing by villagers. Stephen had to go against his own party!"

"I know what an Enclosure Act is," Rees said irritably. "And I fully understand that he is a worthy man."

"So it would be better for all concerned if we simply created evidence of my adultery."

"I don't see any reason for us to go to the tremendous expense of effecting a divorce," Rees said. Despite all his caution, he was starting to get angry. It was something about that martyr role that she played so well: as if he had ruined her life. Whereas it was more the opposite she had ruined his life!

Her jaw set. "I don't wish to be married to you any longer, Rees."

"We can't all have what we want. And now you seem to have the best of all worlds, if you'll excuse a little plain speaking. You have the proper politician for a bit of kiss and tumble on the side, as well as the title of countess and the very generous allowance I make you."

"I don't give a fig for the allowance," she said. Her eyes were glacial.

"No, I don't suppose you do." He was losing his temper again. Damn it, but she had a way of getting under his skin.

"Because if you did, you might actually buy some clothing designed to appeal to a man. How the hell does Fairfax-Lacy fight his way through that thing you're wearing?" He eyed her thick woolen dressing gown.

She raised her chin and squared her shoulders. She could have been wearing the mantle of a queen. "The allowance, the title they're nothing. It's a baby that I want," she said. And to Rees's horror, her voice wobbled. Helene and he never, ever showed vulnerability to each other. It was beyond possibility that he should comfort her.

"A baby. I believe you told me that before," he said, giving her time to gather herself together.

Helene took a deep breath and leaned forward. She had to convince Rees: she simply had to. Never mind the fact that she had no intention of marrying Stephen. It took ages to obtain a divorce, and she could find someone else to marry during the process. "Have you seen Esme's baby?" she asked.

"Of course not. Why on earth would I venture into the nursery to peer at a newborn?"

"William is the dearest little boy that you ever saw," Helene said, trying vainly to convey the stab of longing that overtook her at the very sight of the baby. "His eyes are a lovely clear blue. And he looks at Esme so sweetly. I think he already knows who she is."

Rees couldn't stand children. They mewled, spit and vomited on a regular basis. They also created any manner of revolting odors without the slightest consideration for others in the room. Moreover, there was something about the slavish adoration in her voice that set his teeth on edge.

"A baby is unlikely, in your situation," he said bluntly. "You would do

better to avoid the nursery, if a mere visit sends you into this kind of transport of emotion."

Helene had been smiling a little, but the smile withered immediately. "Why not?" she demanded. "And what precisely do you mean by my situation?" Rees was grateful to hear that her voice was not trembling now; she sounded more likely to garrotte him on the spot.

"You would do better to simply accept the truth," he said. "I have done so, I assure you. I have no hope of having an heir." Never mind the fact that he'd never wanted one. "I think it is far better that we simply accept our situation."

"And that is?"

"We're married to each other and, obviously, our marriage isn't tenable. But no putative second husband has presented himself. Fairfax-Lacy won't even stand by you during the divorce. Therefore, he's extremely unlikely to marry you afterwards."

"He would!" Her voice was shrill now, but Rees far appreciated shrill over teary.

"I doubt it. And frankly, my dear, he's eyeing that wanton little friend of Lady Withers's. So even if he did obtain an Act of Parliament allowing him to marry you and I suppose, given his position, he has more chance of success than most men he'd be as unfaithful to you as I am." Rees rather liked the way he had summed up their situation. "If you find a braver consort, I'd be happy to reconsider the idea of divorce," he added.

"Bloody hell!" She exploded out of her chair like one of those Chinese firecrackers he'd seen in London. "How bloody generous of you! You are the most stubborn, disgusting man in all England!"

"I think I am being perfectly reasonable," Rees said, staying right where he was. Surely husbands didn't have to follow that nonsense about standing up every time a lady did.

"Reasonable!"

"You would be happier if you simply accepted the situation," he said.

"You bastard!"

That caught him on the raw. "Don't you think that I would like

something more?" he roared. He bounded from his chair and grabbed her by the shoulders. "Don't you think that I would like a real marriage? A wife I could love, could talk with, laugh with?"

For a second she shrunk away from him, and then she raised her head and glared. "Am I responsible for that? No! You eloped with me when I was barely out of the schoolroom!"

"I was barely of age myself," he said. "We were fools together, Helene, don't you see?" He gave her a little shake. "God knows I'd love to take back the moment I asked you to elope. I wanted more from life than I have! I see Darby and Henrietta together, and I wish" He turned away. There was no point in continuing this subject. He sat down, plopping into the chair with a sense of exhaustion that took his whole being.

There was silence in the room for a moment and then, with a faint rustle of wool, she sat down opposite him.

"So," she said finally, "you see your friend Darby and his new wife, and you wish for a more appropriate spouse. Someone as charming and beautiful as Henrietta, I gather. Whereas I see Esme's baby, and I feel equally envious."

"My only point," he said, feeling as tired as he ever had in his life, "is that at some point one simply has to accept what's happened. I made a mistake, and God knows I've paid for it."

"You've paid for it," she whispered, incredulous. He could see her small fists clenched in her lap. "I'm the one who lives to be ridiculed, to have everyone tell me about your opera singer. I'm the one who wants a child and will never be able to have one. I'm the one who can't even attract a man willing to face the scandal of marrying me! Your life is perfect. You have your music and your opera singer. And I don't believe for a moment that you really want Henrietta: she's not at all musical."

"I don't want Henrietta. I just want what Darby has with his wife." Rees leaned his head back against the carved oak of his chair. "Fool that I am, I want a woman's companionship."

After that, they just sat there.

Helene didn't say anything about the light his comment cast on his relationship with his opera singer, the woman living in Helene's own bedchamber.

And Rees didn't say anything about the fact that Helene herself had admitted that Fairfax-Lacy didn't have the nerve to stand by her during a divorce.

There had been precious few acts of kindness in this particular marriage, but sometimes silence can be the greatest kindness of all.

Chapter 30

In the Midst of the Night

It was two o'clock in the morning, and Sebastian had only just managed to wave his mother off to her bedchamber. She had spent the evening babbling of balls and Almack's and other locales at which he was sure to meet an eligible wife. A fertile one, as she kept emphasizing. But he didn't want a wife, not even the fruitful woman his mother had set her heart on. Naturally, he couldn't visit Esme's bedchamber during the day. But now was it late enough? Surely the child would be snug in the nursery, and that would leave Esme able to receive visitors. She'd been through an ordeal. He had to see her.

He walked up the darkened stairs feeling as cautious as a man rendezvousing with a new mistress. Esme's room was quite light due to a roaring fire in the grate. Esme herself was sitting in the middle of her bed, rocking back and forth, the baby in her arms. Her hair had fallen forward over her face, and she apparently didn't hear him come in.

He closed the door softly. "Esme," he whispered.

Her whole body jerked, and she stared up at him. She looked so exhausted and drawn that Sebastian swallowed. He knew birth was difficult, but my God, she looked as if she'd been through the wars.

And then he heard a thin wail. Esme shot him a look of pure rage, and turned to the child. Miraculously, the anger dropped away, and her face turned to an expression of pure adoration. She started cooing at the baby, and smiling at him, and dusting his little face with kisses. Naturally the child stopped crying immediately. Even more so when Esme offered him her breast. Sebastian sat down next to the bed and watched as moonlight washed over Esme's tumbling hair, her breast,

the baby's little hand holding her finger as he suckled. Surely it was wrong to feel such longing to be part of the group. But he did. He wanted to climb onto the bed, to help position William at her breast, to

To be there.

"He seems to be a good-natured child," Sebastian ventured, once Esme had tucked William over her shoulder and was patting his back.

Her eyes flashed at him. "He's very delicate. I shall have to be quite careful that he doesn't take cold."

Sebastian watched William's chubby legs kicking. "He is delicate?"

Esme nodded as William gave a burp.

"He sounds like one of the lads down at the tavern," Sebastian said. William looked at him with a beery expression. "He even looks drunk."

"He does not!" Esme said indignantly. "But Sebastian, don't you think he's the image of Miles? I knew he would be. I just knew he would be."

To Sebastian, William looked like most of the babies he'd seen in his life: bald, round and red. Yes, he looked like Miles. But then all babies looked like Miles.

"I have blue eyes," he said, unable to stop himself.

"Not that azure blue," Esme said. "And it's not the color that matters anyway. It's the way he looks at one, with such a deep sweetness just like Miles. He's the sweetest boy in the whole world, aren't you?" And she gathered little William up into her arms and kissed him all over his face again. "Now he has to go to sleep," Esme said, looking expectantly at Sebastian. So he left.

She likely thought he would leave the house as well. But no. He would stay. And his mother would have to stay as well, like it or not. If the ton discovered the whereabouts of the notorious Marquess Bonnington, the presence of his stodgy mother would likely dispel some suspicion.

Or perhaps it wouldn't. He didn't really give a damn.

William slept most of the following day while Esme and Arabella

hovered over the crib, pointing out the pink perfection of his toes, and the sweetness of his round tummy. Esme was convinced he already knew who she was. "That's a loving look," she told her aunt when William finally opened his eyes.

"If you say so," Arabella said.

"I know it. Do you think William is warm enough? I think his cheek is a bit chilled." She felt it with the back of her hand and tucked his blankets around him even more securely.

"I'll ring the footman for another log," Arabella said, going to the other side of the room. That was one of the things that Esme loved about her aunt. Unlike the nursemaid, who was annoyingly contentious, and even her own nanny, Arabella never questioned Esme's judgement.

Esme picked William up and put his little cheek against her own. It felt like the softest silk in the world.

"So your mother writes that she will visit at her earliest convenience?" Arabella asked, coming back and fingering the delicate embroidery on William's coverlet.

"I'm so happy about it," Esme said. "It was disappointing when she didn't visit during my confinement. But she can't help but love William."

Arabella cast her a worried look. "Of course Fanny will love William. But I just" Her voice trailed off.

"Don't worry. William will enchant her."

Arabella took another glance at her niece's hopeful face and decided that she had to speak. "I'm worried for you, Esme. Your mother has suffered many disappointments in her life. She's not always as agreeable as she could be."

"I know that," Esme said instantly. She had always been aware that she was her mother's primary trial. "But William will make up for all that, don't you see? And of course, I'm going to be just the sort of daughter she always wished for. She won't have to be ashamed of me anymore."

"Yee-es. I certainly hope that's the way of it."

"But you don't believe it?"

"I'm afraid that you may be disappointed," Arabella admitted. "I shall scream at Fanny if she hurts your feelings. But, I just"

"You mustn't worry so much. Truly, Mama has always wished me to be respectable, and now I am. I'm living in Wiltshire like the virtuous widow I am. What more could she want?"

"Fanny has a difficult nature. She has spent a great deal of her adult life berating you for one thing or another, and I never approved of it, never."

Esme gave her a rueful grin. "It's not as if I didn't deserve it. I'm the first to say that my reputation was precisely as black as it deserved to be."

"But Fanny was disappointed even before you grew into such a convenient whipping boy. When I was growing up with her, she was always finding fault with me as well. In fact, Esme, my sister Fanny is a bit of a malcontent. Your grandfather used to call her Miss Tart, because of the way she pranced around the house with her mouth tight, finding fault with everyone."

"I know Mama has had .an onerous life," Esme said. She was tickling William through his blankets, and he looked as if he might start smiling any moment. "But perhaps having a grandchild will transform some of her discouragement, especially if he starts smiling. Smile, William! Smile for Mama! And he is beautiful. Even Sebastian said last night that" She stopped short and turned around to find Arabella looking at her and shaking her head.

"A woman after my own heart," Arabella said. "I told you that living with a man was far more fun than living alone, didn't I?"

Esme bit her lip. "Sebastian only"

"Never mind the details. What about Fairfax-Lacy? When are you planning to drop that pretense?"

"Not yet! Not until after my mother visits. The only reason she is making a visit is due to Lady Bonnington telling her of my engagement."

"In that case, I would advise that you wait until nighttime to entertain Bonnington again. Lord knows, if Honoratia Bonnington found out that her son was making secret trips to your bedchamber, and you still in confinement, she'd likely shriek the roof down."

Esme smiled a bit at that. "I'm not worried about the marchioness. It's Mother, of course, whom I would prefer not to realize that Sebastian and I have a friendship."

"Naturally," Arabella agreed. "We definitely do not wish for sainted Fanny to discover that you have a man visiting your bedchamber in the wee hours of the night."

"There's nothing salacious about his visits," Esme hastened to say.

Arabella bent over the crib again, and Esme couldn't see her face. "My first husband, Robbie, used to look at me the way Marquess Bonnington looks at you."

"I don't think I remember him," Esme said. "And Sebastian doesn't look at me in any particular fashion."

"Robbie died when you were a young girl. You likely never would have met him anyway. How he loathed your father!"

"Were you very much in love?" Esme asked.

"Too much," Arabella answered flatly. She turned around, and her smile was bright. "Never fall in love, darling. It makes farewells utterly dreary."

Esme didn't say anything to that nonsense, but just gave her a kiss.

"I can't be as angry at your mother as I'd like to be," Arabella said, with one of her lightning changes of conversation, "because I was so lucky with my first marriage, and she so unlucky. Robbie was a sweet-hearted man. He died laughing, you know. We were riding in the country, and he was laughing at something I said. He wasn't paying attention, and his horse caught a rabbit-hole."

"Oh, Arabella," Esme said, putting her arms around her.

"I only tell you because your memories of your father are undoubtedly as clear as mine," Arabella said. "That man never laughed a day in his life. Being married to him was a terrible hardship, for all your mother won't acknowledge it. Terrible. I was allowed to choose my husband, as I was the homely sister. But Fanny went to the highest bidder."

"Don't you think that William will assuage some of her grief?"

"I hope so, darling. I hope so."

Chapter 31

A Proposal

There was no saying when, if ever, Arabella might decide to return to London for the rest of the season. As far as Bea could see, Arabella spent every spare moment fussing over the baby's clothing and counting his toes. She and Esme hovered over that fat little creature as if it were made of spun sugar. Earl Godwin left; Lord Winnamore finally left as well. There was no one in the house to talk to, given that Helene and Stephen pounded away at the keyboard for hours.

Not that it mattered much, because all Bea could think about was the Puritan, and his wish to be wooed rather than seduced. Wooed. Whatever that meant.

She headed off down the lane to visit the goat. It was very cold, and the wind was sprinkling small white flowers all over the lane, almost as if it were snowing. It could be a pear tree losing all its blossoms; Bea had almost made up her mind to try to find a book identifying plants. That was how boring she was becoming.

When she rounded the bend, he was there. Bea slowed down. Wooing, wooing. She was no good at wooing. She was only good at seduction. Why didn't he understand that? Why didn't he know that she had nothing else to offer? She tramped up beside him and leaned on the fence without bothering to say hello. A large hand curled around her neck.

"Bea," he said. Why did he have to have a voice like that?

"Doesn't the Parliament miss you?" she asked aimlessly, trying to take her attention away from that warm hand.

"It doesn't seem that way. According to the morning paper, they just passed a law giving poachers seven years' hard labor. I keep thinking of an old man named Maidstone, who lived on our estate when I was young. He was such a one, poached in my father's forest his entire life. It was an art to old Maidstone. My father sent me out with him to learn to shoot."

"I wish I could shoot," Bea said. "My father didn't consider it a ladylike pursuit."

"Perhaps I'll teach you."

The statement hung in the air between them. She finally risked a glance at him, and he was smiling at her.

"When you're my wife."

She suddenly felt the splintering wood of the gate under her fingers. "You are engaged already."

"You know as well as I do that the engagement is a temporary one, having naught to do with love nor even desire."

White petals had floated onto his dark hair. "I could never marry you. I thought you understood that."

"You must have misunderstood." He moved closer and looked down at her. His eyes were flames, telling her something. But the misery in her heart was beating in her ears.

"Men like you don't take wives like me," she cried.

"Am I too old?"

"Don't be a fool."

He smiled a little. "Too rigid?"

"Something like that. It would destroy your career."

"I don't care about my career."

"Who will save the poachers from seven years' hard labor?"

"Someone else," he said. "I will go home and take care of Maidstone's son, who is undoubtedly poaching every pheasant I have in the world."

"You can't marry me." It seemed imperative to make him understand. "I am ruined, Stephen." Her face was wet with tears, and she didn't even know where they had come from. "Don't you understand that? And damn you for making me say it aloud! Why do you insist on being so cruel? I told you, you can have me!" Her voice broke with the humiliation of it. And the truth of it. He stared at her, eyes veiled.

"You could have had me, anywhere," she said brokenly. "On the billiards table, in the library. Anywhere. You're some sort of debauchee, aren't you? You just enjoy tormenting me. You don't even really want me."

"No." His voice was hard. "That's not the case and you know it, Bea. I want you." He took her shoulders. "I want you more than any other man has wanted you. But I don't want only your delectable body. Or your mouth. Or even the direction to your bedroom door. I want more, Bea, and if you can't give it to me, I don't want any of it."

She stared ahead, and the goat's sharp little horns were blurred by her tears. "I wish things were different," she said. "I wish I weren't myself, or that myself was"

"No! You don't understand. I want you with all your face paints, and all your sultry glances, and all your wicked poetry. I want you just as you are, Bea."

It was probably a tribute to her father that she didn't believe him for a moment.

She cleared her throat. "That is remarkably kind of you. I am honored, truly. Of course, I might be even more honored if you didn't already have a fiancée. But I appreciate your willingness to add me to the list."

"Stuff that," he said, and his voice was harsh and utterly unlike the smooth cadences that members were used to hearing in the House. "Don't be honored," he said fiercely. "Be my wife."

"I can't do that." She turned and faced him, head high. "I care for you too much. You may be exhausted by your position at the moment, but you will long for it after a few months. I don't see you spending your days fishing and befriending poachers, Stephen. After a month, even a year perhaps, you would yearn for your position back. And they'd never give it to you, never. Not after you married me."

"I disagree, Bea. I could marry you and stay in Parliament. But I want to resign. If I grow bored in the country, I'll find something to do. But not Parliament. I don't want to think about votes again. I'd rather think about you."

"Leave," she said tersely, hanging onto the splintered boards with all her might. "Just leave, Stephen."

The smile fell from his face.

"Please leave," she whispered.

Chapter 32

And Motherly Love, Part Two

Esme's mother arrived on a beautiful spring day, a week after her grandson's birth. Esme looked out her bedchamber window and there it was, rounding the bend before the road to Shantill House: a squat, ugly carriage that she remembered from her childhood. The family used to travel to and from London in it. The seats were made of slippery horsehair and sloped upward. As a child, Esme constantly slid to the carriage floor, earning a scolding for her fidgety nature.

William was sleeping in her arms, his long eyelashes curling against his cheek. "I'll never make you ride in a carriage for hours," she whispered to him. And then rethought that promise. "Well, perhaps only if we make many stops."

Then she turned aside and rang the bell. "My mother has arrived," she told Jeannie. "I must change my clothing. I'll wear the gray morning gown with the white lace trim, the one with the small tippet. And I shall wear a cap as well, perhaps with a silver ribbon so it matches."

Jeannie looked surprised. "But, madam, that gown is half-mourning, and so heavy for this weather. Wouldn't you prefer to wear something more cheerful? Surely your lady mother will wish to see you more lighthearted. We don't even have such a thing as a silver ribbon in the house!"

"No, the gray dress will be perfect." Fanny had worn full mourning for two years after Esme's father died. The least Esme could do was appear to have a virtue, even if she had it not.

"Shall I take Master William to the nursery?" Jeannie said, once Esme was dressed in gray, complete with a lace cap but no silver ribbon.

"I'll bring him downstairs with me. I'm certain my mother is quite eager to see her grandson."

"Of course she is! And he's the bonniest boy that's ever lived. She'll

likely cry with pure joy. I know my mother would."

When Esme entered the morning parlor, she found her mother seated with Marchioness Bonnington and Arabella. To Esme's relief, Bea was nowhere to be seen. Esme had a secret fear that her mother would take affront at the idea of staying in the same house with her sister's dame de compagnie and leave without delay.

She could see on the instant that Fanny and Arabella were already twitting at each other. They were seated opposite each other, and Arabella had the look of someone who has just delivered a magnificent set-down. Fanny was shaking her head sadly and looking at her younger sister as if she were addled. Esme hurried across the room toward them.

Fanny looked like an exquisite watercolor rendition of Arabella. Arabella's hair was ginger; Fanny's was a pale rose. Arabella's complexion was a tribute to French face paints; Fanny's face had a delicate bloom all her own. Arabella's face somehow just missed being beautiful, but Fanny had been acknowledged as flawless from the moment she'd toddled into her papa's arms.

"Mama, it is such a pleasure to see you!" Esme cried. "I've brought William, who is longing to meet his grandmother."

All three ladies looked up. Her mother gave her the melancholy smile with which she always greeted her daughter, a perfect blend of responsibility and disappointment. Impulsively Esme went to her knees beside her mother and folded the blanket back from around William's face so Fanny could see him. He was still sleeping peacefully, as beautiful a child as she'd ever seen. William was the one thing in life that Esme had done perfectly.

But her mother looked at her rather than at William. "Esme," she said, "I must ask you to seat yourself properly. We are not en famille here. There is no need for such boisterous manners."

Lady Bonnington leaned forward. "Please don't insist on convention on my account, Fanny dear. I find your daughter's affection for her child quite refreshing."

Esme rose and seated herself next to her mother on the settee. Fanny raised her eyebrows slightly and then finally looked down at William. For a moment she stared at him in utter silence.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Esme said, unable to stop herself. "Isn't he the

most darling baby you ever saw, Mama?"

Her mother closed her eyes and put out a wavering hand as if to push William away. "He looks just like your brother," she murmured, turning her face away and shading her eyes. Her hand stayed in the air, shaking slightly with the strength of her emotion.

Esme bit her lip. "William doesn't resemble Benjamin so much," she ventured. "Benjamin had such a lovely cap of black hair, do you remember? Even when he was"

"Naturally I remember every moment of my son's short life!" her mother broke in. "You do me great disservice, daughter, to suggest that I could forget the smallest detail of my little angel's face." She sat with her face shaded by her hand, overcome by grief.

Esme was stricken into silence. She literally didn't know what to say.

"William is quite an adorable child," Arabella said. There was a crackling warning in her voice. "And I do think that he has the look of his father rather than Esme. In fact, I would say that William is the spitting image of Miles Rawlings. Why don't you look at William more closely, Fanny?"

Esme's mother visibly shuddered. "I couldn't I just couldn't." She waved her slim white hand in the air. "Please, remove the child. I simply am not strong enough for this sort of blow. Not today. Perhaps when I am having a better day."

"Of course, Mama," Esme said quietly, tucking William's blanket around his face. "I'll take him back to the nursery."

"Give him to the footman," her mother instructed, sounding a bit stronger. "I didn't come all the way to this house merely to watch you act like a servant."

Esme had never given William to one of the servants, but she handed him over without a murmur. She should have realized how much pain the baby would cause her mother.

No wonder Fanny hadn't attended her confinement. The whole event was undoubtedly too distressing to contemplate. As she returned to the parlor, Esme braced herself for the look of disapproval that always crossed her mother's face. But it was, miraculously, not there. Esme blinked and almost stumbled.

"Do come here, daughter," Fanny said, patting the seat next to her.

Esme sat down next to her, careful to not allow her back to touch the back of the settee.

"We were just discussing how much your cap suits you," Fanny said. "I think you will find that a cap truly eases one's life. It does the necessary work of informing lecherous men that you are a woman of propriety and virtue. They never, ever make indecent proposals to a woman in a cap."

Arabella looked at Esme with a faint smile. "I've just told your mother that she needn't lend me one of hers."

Fanny ignored that. "And Lady Bonnington has been regaling me with tales of your fiance's devotion. I must say, he sounds like an estimable gentleman. What a shame that Mr. Fairfax-Lacy stands to lose his courtesy title if the Duke of Girton's wife gives birth to a son. The Earl of Spade, isn't he? Of course, the duchess may birth a girl. We shall have to hope for the best."

"Mr. Fairfax-Lacy doesn't use his title," Esme murmured.

But her mother swept on. "It would be even better were the earl to give up his seat in Parliament. The House of Commons is so very common, is it not?"

"Mr. Fairfax-Lacy plans to resign his seat," Esme said. "He wishes to spend more time on his estate."

Her mother gave her a smile and patted her hand. "I'm certain that you can effect the earl's resignation without delay. I feel quite heartened by this news, dearest."

"I'm very glad to hear it, Mama."

"Perhaps you could marry by special license," her mother continued. "That would be by far the more respectable choice. No one to gawk, as would happen in a public ceremony."

"Choice? What choice does she have?" Arabella said, and there was a distinct jaundiced note in her voice.

"Whether to remain a widowed woman or marry Mr. Fairfax-Lacy immediately," Fanny said sharply. "Given our plans to rehabilitate dear Esme's position in society, I tend to think that immediate

marriage would not be frowned upon. What do you think, Honoratia?" she asked the marchioness.

"While I am naturally eager to see Lady Rawlings settled in such a beneficial position," Lady Bonnington announced, "I do not approve of marriages within the first twelve months of mourning."

Esme breathed a sigh of relief.

Arabella gave her a wink. "You must be eager to find an appropriate spouse for your son," she said, turning to Lady Bonnington, "since he has returned from the Continent. I know there is no one of the slightest interest to him at this house party, but I am quite certain that you must have some thoughts on the subject."

Esme's mother stiffened. Clearly she had had no idea that her friend's disreputable son was even in the country, let alone in the very house in which she sat. "May I ask" she said, her voice shrill.

But Lady Bonnington broke in. She was magnificently quelling, Esme had to admit. "Fanny, there is no one in the world who deprecates my son's behavior more than I do. But I decided he had been in exile long enough. He has naturally attended me here; as a dutiful son, he is engaged in accompanying his mother wherever I wish to be."

"But this particular household is surely not the appropriate place to be!" Fanny sputtered. "Given the events of last summer"

"We do not speak of that," Lady Bonnington said with magnificent hauteur.

Fanny snapped her mouth shut.

Esme had to hide a smile. Perhaps she could learn something of Lady Bonnington's technique herself.

"The events of last summer were grievous for everyone in this room." Lady Bonnington gave Esme a little nod, and then turned back to Fanny. "You must understand, Fanny, that I have decided to keep that boy on a very tight rein. Where I go, he goes. I found London entirely too stuffy and tedious this season, and I decided to retreat to the country."

Fanny nodded. "I agree with you. It is far too early for the marquess to reenter London society. But must he be here, in my daughter's house?"

"No one could possibly question his presence, given that I am here," the dowager trumpeted.

"That is certainly true," Arabella put in merrily. "And now that you are here as well, Fanny, this party is positively taking on the air of a wake!"

"Your levity is repugnant," Fanny snapped. "My only pleasure in making this visit is finding that my daughter has changed so much." She patted Esme's hand. "You have become the daughter I always dreamed of."

"Yes, Esme has been remarkably silent, hasn't she?" Arabella put in.

"Silence is a virtue that few women understand. Believe me, a virtuous silence is a far greater blessing than the kind of impudent chatter that you consider conversation," Fanny retorted.

"You must ask Esme to tell you about her Sewing Circle," Arabella said, standing up and shaking out her skirts. "I am afraid that the very sanctity of this room is wearying to such a devout Jezebel as myself."

Esme felt an unhappy hiccup in the area of her heart. Fanny had leveled the same disapproving glare at her sister that she usually gave to her daughter. On the one hand, it was a pleasure not to be the target of her censure. But Esme didn't like to see Arabella slighted either.

"Aunt Arabella was a blessing to me during my confinement," she said after the door closed. "I don't know what I would have done without her."

"Really?" Fanny asked with languid disinterest. "I can't imagine what that light-heeled sister of mine could possibly do to help anyone. Except perhaps a womanizer. I doubt she would have any hesitation helping such a man."

Esme blinked. She had never before realized the amount of vitriol that her mother felt toward her sister. "In fact, Arabella was quite helpful during William's birth," she said cautiously.

"I knew you would see fit to reproach me for not attending you," Fanny said in a peevish voice. "When you see how much pain it caused me to merely look at a young child, I wonder that you would even bring it up!"

"I didn't mean to imply such a thing."

Lady Bonnington had been sitting silently, watching Fanny and Esme with a rather odd expression on her face. "I will do Lady Withers the credit of saying that she was a source of strength to Lady Rawlings during the birth. Much more so than I was."

Fanny shuddered. "You attended the birth, Honoraria? Why on earth would you put yourself through such an ordeal?"

"'Twas your daughter who went through an ordeal," Lady Bonnington pointed out. "I merely counseled from the bedside."

"Yes, well," Fanny said in a fretting tone of voice. "Naturally I am ecstatic if Arabella actually managed to summon up an ounce of family feeling. When has she ever thought of me? She simply made one short-lived marriage after another, and never a thought for my wishes in the matter."

"Aunt Arabella can hardly be blamed for the deaths of her husbands," Esme pointed out, and then wished that she hadn't opened her mouth.

"She drove them into their graves," Fanny spat. "I grew up with the woman, and I've always known what she was like."

Esme rose and rang the bell. "Why don't I ask Slope to bring us some tea," she suggested. "You must be exhausted after your long carriage ride, Mama."

"As to that, I've been staying a mere hour or so from here, at dear Lady Pindlethorp's house," her mother said. "The season is just too tiring for someone my age, I find. Lady Pindlethorp and I have had a perfectly lovely time in the past fortnight. We have so many interests in common."

Esme turned around slowly. "You mean you have been living at a short distance? Butbut you could have come for a visit at any time!"

Fanny blinked at her. "Not until I was quite certain that you had reformed, my dear. I would never risk my reputation merely on dear Honoratia's assurance, although of course I took her advice quite seriously. No, indeed. I will admit that I had quite given up hope of your reformation, as I believe I mentioned in my letter. I always thought you took after my sister, although naturally I am pleasantly surprised to find you so much changed."

Esme's jaw set. I will not scream, she thought. She felt her face growing red with the effort of not lashing out at her mother. Lady Bonnington seemed to guess, because she quickly turned to Fanny and asked her if she would like to stroll among the roses in the conservatory.

"Only if I need not step a foot outside," Fanny said. "I'm afraid that my poor departed angel, Benjamin, inherited his weak constitution from me. I take a chill at the slightest breath of wind. I am virtually housebound these days, if you can believe it."

Esme curtsied to her mother, walked up the stairs to her chambers, and jerked the cap off her head so harshly that hairpins spilled on the floor. Throwing the cap on the floor didn't help. Neither did stepping on it. Neither did ripping off that horrible gray dress with its foolish little lace tippet that worked so well to give the wearer a nunlike air. None of it helped. She stood in the middle of her bedchamber, chest heaving with tears and pure rage.

She had achieved it all: the Sewing Circle, the respectability, her mother's approval, Miles's wishes why did success make her feel so terribly enraged? And so terribly, terribly afraid, at the same time?

Chapter 33

In Which the Goat Eats a Notable Piece of Clothing

The irritating man hadn't left Shantill House, even after Bea had begged him. He stopped opportuning her and made no seductive moves. Instead he played duets with Helene, which left Bea embroidering on the other side of the room and trying not to think about the Puritan. She stayed away from him. No more flirtatious glances. No more flirtation, period. Certainly no more failed seductions.

It was late morning, and they were gathered in Esme's morning parlor. Arabella and her sister were conducting a genteel squabble; Esme was presumably in the nursery. Naturally, Helene and Stephen were practicing the piano. Bea sat by herself, stitching away on her tapestry.

When Slope arrived with the morning post, Bea looked in the other direction. It was foolish of her to wish that one of her sisters would write. They had never answered her letters, and she was fairly certain that her father was intercepting them. Surely Rosalind would have written. They were only separated in age by a few years. Rosalind was to make her debut next year, and Bea wanted so much to tell her

Well, to tell her not to make her mistake. Or did she mean to tell her to follow her example? Bea kept thinking and thinking about it. On the one hand, it was grievously hard to turn down Stephen's marriage proposal on the grounds that by accepting, she would ruin his career. On the other hand, had she married whomever her father had seen fit to select as her husband, she would still have fallen in love with Stephen at some point, she was sure of that.

So Bea bent over her tapestry and surreptitiously watched the way Stephen leaned toward Helene, the way their shoulders touched as they played. What would it mean to him, to no longer be the estimable Member of Parliament? Would he be happy? If he were married, would he give up his mistresses, not to mention his supposed fiancée, Esme?

Helene received a letter. "I'm going from pillar to post," she told Stephen. "This is from my friend Gina, asking me to visit her during her confinement."

"I gather you refer to the Duchess of Girton?" Stephen said. And at her nod, he added, "Cam, her husband, is my cousin."

Wonderful, Bea thought sourly. Splendidly cozy.

"She and the duke returned from Greece a few months ago," Helene was saying, "and now they are living on their estate. Apparently Gina will be having a child this summer." She made a funny, rueful face.

Bea bit her lip as Stephen put a comforting arm around Helene. They had the intimacy of an old married couple.

"I can't even bear to look at William. Although I love him." The agony in Helene's voice mirrored that in Bea's heart. Nothing more was said, and after a moment Helene and Stephen returned to playing a Turkish march for four hands. Bea was sick of pieces written for four hands. She was sick of everything that had to do with one prim countess and one proper politician.

Abruptly she got up and walked out of the room. She might as well

visit the goat. She still kept a daily pilgrimage to the ungrateful beast, although she hadn't encountered Stephen again in the lane. He seemed to be avoiding the goat, as well as her.

As she tramped down the lane, regardless of the mud clinging to her boots, Bea was actually beginning to think that perhaps she could live in the country. Some sort of wild rose grew over the hedges in the lane. They were pale pink and hung down like faded curtains. For the first time in her life, she had a sense of what happened in spring. A scraggly tree next to the road had broken out all over in white buds. They stuck out from the branches like the knotted ribbons on debutantes' slippers.

And there were daisies growing all up and down the lane. Impulsively Bea started gathering them. Finally she took off her bonnet and filled it with daisies. It hardly mattered if her skin colored in the sun. She could powder it white, or powder it pink. The sun felt kind on her cheeks. Finally she reached the end of the lane and leaned on the pasture gate. He was there, of course, the old reprobate. He trotted over and accepted a branch Bea gave him to chew. Bea even walked in his pasture sometimes; he had never again tried to chew her clothing. She pushed open the gate and headed for the small twisted tree in the center. There were no daisies in the pasture, of course. The goat presumably ate them the moment they poked up their heads. But the tree was in the sun, and surrounded by a patch of grass.

It was when she was sitting against the tree that she realized what she had to do. She had to go home. Go home. Back to her irate father, who wouldn't throw her out again if she promised to be a model of proper behavior. And back to her sisters. She missed her sisters. She didn't want to play the voluptuary role anymore, not after meeting Stephen. He made her games seem rather shabby and hollow, rather than excitingly original.

Without really thinking about it, she picked all the daisies from her bonnet and braided a daisy chain, a rather drunken daisy chain that had a few stems sticking out at right angles. It was just the sort she used to make for her little sisters. Perhaps she would ask Arabella to send her home tomorrow morning.

He was there, in front of her, before she even noticed his arrival. "How you do sneak up on one!" she snapped.

"You are the very picture of spring," he said, staring down at her.

Bea allowed him a smile. She rather fancied that compliment, since she was wearing a horrendously expensive Marie Antoinette-styled shepherdess dress that laced up the front and had frothy bits at the sides. Suddenly he dropped onto his haunches in front of her, and she blinked at him. His eyes were dark and

She reached out and touched his cheek. "What's the matter, Stephen? Are you all right?" She forgot they weren't on intimate terms and that, in fact, she had hardly spoken to him in virtually a week.

"No, I'm not," he said, rather jerkily. "I've made rather a mess of my life."

"Why do you say that?" Bea asked, taken aback.

"Because I asked a lady to woo me," he said, and the look in his eyes made her knees weak. "Because I asked a lady to woo me, and she very properly refused. I was unfathomably stupid to ask such a thing."

Bea bit her lip. "Why?" Don't say that you never wanted me, she prayed inside. But there was that something in his eyes that gave her hope.

"Because I should have said, 'Seduce me. Take me. Please !'"

Bea supposed that was her cue to leap on him like a starving animal, but she stayed where she was. Her heart was beating so fast that she almost couldn't feel her own disappointment. Wasn't this just what she wanted? Of course it was.

"You see, I need her any way she'll have me," Stephen said. His voice had lost all those liquid rolling tones he used so well. It was almost hoarse. "Any time she'll give me. I don't care. I won't make any demands."

Bea couldn't quite meet his eyes. She fidgeted with the ribbon on her parasol, tilting it slightly so that she couldn't see his face. "I've decided to return to my father's house," she said almost inaudibly. He was silent, and all she could hear was her own pulse beating in her throat and the goat ambling away to the other side of the pasture.

"Am I too late, then?" he said finally. There was a bleakness in his voice that wrenched her heart.

She took the parasol and neatly closed it. He would always have a patrician's face. It was the face of an English gentleman, long chin and

lean cheeks, laughter wrinkles around his eyes, tall, muscled body. He would wear well. She raised her eyelashes and gave him the most smoldering look she had in her repertoire.

He made a hoarse sound in his voice and pulled her into his arms so fast that her parasol flew into the air.

"Will you, Bea, will you let me" He was plundering her mouth, and he couldn't seem to finish the sentence. Finally he raised his mouth a fraction of an inch from hers, so close that she was almost touching his lips. His voice was husky. "Will you seduce me, Bea? Or let me seduce you?"

She strained forward, trying to catch his mouth with hers, but he held back.

"Please?" The urgency in his voice awed her. "I was a fool to refuse you. I'll take anything, any little bit you'll give me. Of course you don't wish to woo me, marry me. But I'll take whatever you give me, Bea. Please."

She closed her eyes. One of the proudest gentlemen in the kingdom was literally, as well as metaphorically, at her feet. "I didn't mean that," she whispered, clutching his shoulders as hard as she could. "It's not that I don't wish to marry you"

"Hush," he said, rubbing his lips across hers. "I know you don't want to marry me. I was a conceited fool to think you'd even consider me. But I don't care, Bea. Just seduce me, Bea."

She could untangle this later. At the moment she unwrapped her arms from his neck and smiled at him with the slumberous smile of Cleopatra. "But what if I lead you to do things that are less than gentlemanly?"

"You already have," he said. "This is absolutely the first time in my life that I have begged a young unmarried woman to seduce me."

"Oh, well, in that case," she said, with a gurgle of laughter. Then she settled back against the tree trunk and, looking at him, very, very slowly raised the ruffled dimity of her skirt. She was wearing gossamer silk stockings, with clocks, and her slender ankles were crossed. She pulled her skirts up just past her knee, so that Stephen could see the pale blue stocking, and its darker garter, and then the pale cream of her thigh.

She saw him swallow. "Bea, what are you doing?" he said, and the rasp in his voice was a warning.

"Seducing you." Her smile was blinding. He didn't seem to be able to stop staring at her legs.

"What if someone comes?"

"No one ever comes down this lane," she said blissfully. "It leads nowhere except to the goat. And you and I, Stephen, are the only persons who have ever shown interest in the goat."

Just as deliberately she uncrossed her legs and drew them slightly higher. Her skirt fell back against her thighs.

"And where is the damned goat?" he said hoarsely.

"The other side of the field." Her knees came a little higher, and her skirts slid farther down, exposing smooth, milky thighs.

"If I touch you, Bea, there's no stopping this," Stephen said, meeting her eyes.

Her heart tumbled in her chest. "I wouldn't want to stop you. I never have."

He put his hands gently on her ankles. "Last chance, Bea. Are you sure you wish to make love in a goat's pasture?" But she was laughing, and her eyes were shining. There was desire there, so that was all right. And obviously, she didn't mind the goat's pasture. So Stephen let his fingers wrap around that delicate little ankle, slide up the faint softness of her stockings. He stopped at the garters and untied them. They left angry red marks on her skin.

She was watching him with a half smile, but there was something uncertain there too, for all she was such an accomplished seductress. He smoothed the red marks with his fingers. "Why so ruthless with your poor skin?" he said, as he lowered his head and ran his tongue along the groove in her leg.

She gasped and squirmed in his hands. "It's particularly difficult to keep stockings this flimsy from collapsing around my ankles."

"Ah." He had his hands on both her knees now, and he pulled them apart. She resisted for a moment and then gave in. She was wearing some sort of fluttering gown that obediently fell back, as if it had been

designed for outdoor games. Stephen ran a finger down the inside of her thigh. He stopped at a burst of lacy cotton, then ran his finger over all the fabric.

She visibly shuddered and reached for him. But he pushed her back against the tree and knelt in front of her, between her raised knees, and pressed his lips there, on the inside of a quavering knee. And then let his lips drift down, down smooth, ivory flesh.

And all the time his finger was running inquisitively over the white cotton between her legs, dancing a little surface dance that made her hips jiggle a bit. He could hear her uneven little whoosh of breath, and it made him feel a steely wave of triumph, and then a wave of lust so pure that he almost wrenched that cotton down

"What do you call this?" he asked, and his voice came out hoarse. He put his hand between her legs, firm, and rocked forward.

"Oh," she said, and her voice seemed very small.

He ran his thumb under the frilly border. "This?"

"Pantalettes," she said, quivering all over.

He leaned forward and put a leg over her left knee so he was straddling her, and then he let that thumb sink, fall into sleek, hot folds. She had been lying against the tree as if she were too shocked to move, but that shudder woke her up; she reached out and pulled his head toward her.

Her lips trembled under his, and opened, and Stephen let his thumb take on the same rhythm as his tongue, although his chest felt like bursting for lack of air, or for the thumping of his heart in his chest.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she was beautiful. This close, her eyes had the green of a rock glimpsed at the river bottom, greeny blue, with small specks of light. All the more beautiful for being slightly glazed.

Suddenly she focused on him. "You seem to have forgotten that this is my seduction," she said. Her voice was such a deep purr that he almost didn't catch her meaning. But with one flip of her hip, she pushed his hand away and came up on her knees. Alas, her skirt fell down and covered her legs again.

He reared up so he was facing her. Then he very, very deliberately

took his thumb and rubbed it over his lips. She gasped in shock, and he felt a throb of pleasure. She wasn't so jaded then. He licked his lips, enjoying the faint taste of her.

"Stephen!" she said. He grinned. But she was pulling at his neck cloth. She seemed to have some trouble undoing it, so finally he tossed it to the side and undid the placket on his shirt.

It was her turn then to inch that shirt up his muscled abdomen. Her fingers were everywhere, delicate, admiring. The shirt billowed past his eyes and disappeared. Now her fingers were at his waist. But she couldn't seem to undo the buttons there either. She looked so serious.

"I thought you'd make my clothes fly off like greased lightning," he said teasingly. But she didn't look up, so he pushed up her chin. "That was only a jest, Bea. In poor taste, to be sure, but a jest."

"I" Her eyes were larger, not so passionate now. Stephen felt a pang of pure fear. She'd changed her mind. She didn't want him. He was too old.

"I'm afraid I'll disappoint you," she said.

"Never."

"I don'tI don't have as much experience as you might think," she said, staring fixedly at his waistband as she tried to undo it. The very feeling of her fingers fumbling around his pantaloons was driving Stephen crazy.

But once he registered what she'd said, he laughed. "I don't care what kind of experience you've got, Bea. All I want is you. You." He pushed up her chin again. Her lips were swollen with his kisses. "Oh God, Bea, you're so beautiful."

But she wasn't really listening. "You see, I didthat is, there was Sandhurst, but it was only once, and I'm afraid I didn't learn very much, especially as we were interrupted by Lady Ditcher. And then I allowed Billy Laslett, but I didn't truly enjoy it towards the end, and so I told him to go."

Stephen laughed. "Are you trying to tell me that the bold seductress herself didn't find the experience pleasurable?"

Bea blushed. "No, I did. Although I wish I hadn't."

"Why?"

"Because it would make me almost like a virgin, wouldn't it?" Her eyes were shadowed. "But I did enjoy it, up to a point. I haven't liked well, that's irrelevant. I took another lover once too." The last came out in a rush of admissions. "So you see, I've had three lovers. But I never gave anyone a second chance, and I'm not certain that I actually learned very much, if you see what I mean."

Stephen threw back his head and laughed, laughed so hard that four starlings and a wren flew out of the crooked tree and wheeled into the sunlight. When he looked back, she was still there, blinking at him, looking a little defensive, extraordinarily lovely, and far too young.

"Bea, you are over twenty-one, aren't you?" he said.

"I'm twenty-three."

"Good. Are you trying to tell me that you won't let me have a second round? That one time with lovely Bea is all any man could hope to achieve?" He let his hands settle on her waist.

She blushed faintly. "No." But he could hardly hear her.

"Because I want more, Bea." He lowered his head and brushed his mouth over hers. She opened to him, willing and shuddering. "I'm going to take more," he told her.

Her eyes closed, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. "Take me, Stephen."

An invitation no man could refuse. He took over the job of removing his pantaloons himself. And threw off his boots and every other stitch of clothing he had on as well. She sat on the ground in front of him, mouth open.

He laughed at her. The sun was warm on his shoulders, and under her eyes he had that sense of his body that he only seemed to have with her. A sense of powerful muscle and a lean stomach. He came down on his haunches. She watched him in fascination, her eyes looking either at the powerful muscles in his thighs or between them. He wasn't quite sure. But she seemed to like what she saw. That faint blush in her cheeks had turned rosy.

"I can't believe you're quite naked in the outdoors!" she said. She had her hand over her mouth, but giggles escaped.

"Your turn," he said, and her eyes grew serious.

"Oh, Stephen, I don't know I wasn't thinking" She kept squealing. But Stephen was very good at removing ladies' clothing, and so he had her dress over her head in a moment, and her chemise followed. She wore no corset, to his great interest. He left her only that flimsy little garment she called her pantalettes, a foolish little trifle of white cotton and lace.

The sun threw dancing spots over her ivory skin, skipping shadows of dappled color. Her face was quite rosy. She sat on the ground with her hands covering her breasts, for all the world like a timid virgin. Though of course, even an experienced courtesan might never have made love outdoors.

He kneeled just before her and put his hands over hers. "It's all right, love," he whispered. "Truly, no one will come down the lane."

"It's not that!"

He peeled one of her hands away from the alluring curve of her breast. They were perfect, rosy-tipped, uptilted, just the size for a man's hand. He bent his head and drew her nipple into his mouth, roughly for such a sweet bit of flesh. One hand flew away from her breast and curled around his neck instead.

He couldn't play this game much longer. It had been too long, weeks of longing for her, watching her secretly, watching her openly, dreaming of her. He swept her up in one decisive movement and then put her down gently on top of his jacket. As he kissed her, he let one hand shape her breast so she strained into his hand, and he let his other hand pull down that bit of cotton she called a pantalette.

She wasn't sure about that. "What if someone?" but her voice was melting. He moved down, kissed her breast in passing until she squeaked out loud, until she writhed upwards, kept going further down her body until he found her. Until he had all that sweet, lemony flesh in front of him, and she was moaning, all deep in her throat and begging him, and begging him, and

She reached out, grabbed his hair and yanked it hard. Bea could hardly breathe, because her whole body was on fire, but she knew there was a remedy here. There had to be. And his tormenting her was not going to be the answer.

"I want you," she said fiercely, having got his face where she could see

it.

"It's your seduction, darling," he said. His lopsided grin made her heart somersault, and she almost forgot and just started kissing him again. Instead, she reached down and wrapped her fingers around him, and that did give her a shred of sanity. He was a great deal larger than Billy Laslett, and a great deal, well, firmer than Sandhurst.

For a moment she froze. What if this wasn't possible? Billy had been difficult enough. It was embarrassing to have been a party to that encounter. She had been phenomenally pleased when he'd stopped bucking about on top of her and taken himself away.

But Stephen was smiling down at her, and he seemed to know exactly what she was thinking. He unwrapped her fingers and brought himself forward, nudging her knee out of the way. Bea couldn't help herself. She arched up to meet him. But he was just teasing her, bringing her that hardness and taking it away again.

She may not have learned much, but she had learned one thing, because Billy Laslett had asked her to. She brought her hands down from his neck and deliberately brushed his flat nipples with her fingers. He jumped and arched forward for a moment, deliciously hard. How could she ever have thought that but this wasn't the moment for comparisons.

Instead, she gave him the same lazy, mischievous grin he gave her, and leaned forward and nipped him with her teeth. He groaned and drove forward. The rush of feeling was so exquisite that she flopped backwards and clutched his shoulders. And this time their eyes were serious.

"All right?" he said, hardly able to recognize his own voice.

And she nodded, clutching him so hard that he was going to have ten small bruises on his shoulders. He drove forward again. She cried out, unintelligible, the sound swallowed into the bright air. But it didn't seem to be pain she was registering.

He bent to kiss her, and she made startled, gulping sounds, as if she thought he might lose his balance if he tried to do two things at once. He finally managed to coax her mouth open, but she kept trying to speak.

"What is it?" he finally said, huskily.

"Nothingoh! Don't stop that !"

Stephen smiled to himself. He pulled himself even higher and listened to her squeals floating into the meadow.

After a bit, he came up on his knees and caught her slender hips in his hands. She gasped and said, "No!" and then said nothing. So he taught her that if she lifted her hips to meet him, that was very pleasant too.

At some point she really did seem to have something to say, so he stopped kissing her. "Do you", she was panting. "Do you could you just keep going a little longer?"

He grinned, a fiendish grin. "I'm better at this than I am at billiards," he said. His voice was guttural, deep with desire. She was coming to meet him now, matching him. Her skin was gleaming with sweat in the sunlight. Stephen knew at that exact moment that his Bea had experienced no real woman's pleasure with those other lovers of hers.

She was a virgin, in all real senses of the word.

He felt as if the raw joy burning in the back of his throat might explode, so he simply tucked back, concentrating on showing the woman he loved that she didn't know a thing about making love. Great waves of passion kept swamping the joy. Far off in the distant recesses of his mind not occupied by the sweet undulations of her body, with the way she panted with surprise and the way her eyes were squeezed tight now, as if she were going somewhere that couldn't be seen, he was conscious of two things. One was that his buttocks had never been exposed to an English summer, and they were definitely beginning to feel as if a sunburn might be in the offing. And the second was that that infernal goat had stolen Bea's dress and galloped to the other side of the field with yards of white lace falling from its mouth.

But then even those bits of rational thought flew from him. He dove higher into her body, and she cried out, cries that spiraled, falling away into the bright air. Stephen ground his teeth and said hoarsely, "Come on, Bea, come with me!"

And Bea opened her eyes and saw him poised above her, outlined in the indigo blue sky, her beautiful, proper Puritan.

He stopped for a moment, bent his head and crushed his mouth against her. "I love you," he said hoarsely. "My Bea."

She arched up to meet him, heard his groan, lost herself in the prism of sunshine and pleasure that rained on her, spiraling through her arms and legs, driving her against his chest, telling her without words the difference between wooing and seduction.

Chapter 34

Yours Till Dawn

"Esme, what's the matter?" She was even whiter than when he'd seen her last, her face pallid and drawn. There was a gleaming trail of tears down her cheek. "Is William all right?" Sebastian sat down on the bed and peered at the babe. William looked just as moon-faced as he had last week. Long lashes brushed his cheeks, and he was snoring a little bit. Sebastian felt a funny sensation around his chestbone. He was a sweet-looking child, as children went.

"He's caught a cold," Esme said, her voice strangling on a sob.

Sebastian could see that she had obviously been crying for a long time. He put an arm around her shoulder and peered down at William again.

His rosy little lips opened in a snore.

"There! Do you hear it?" Esme said.

"He's snoring," Sebastian said. "Did Miles snore?"

"That's not a snore. He's caught a cold probably inflammation of the lung," Esme said, tears rolling down her face. "Now I'll only have him with me for a few days at most. I knew this would happen; I knew this would happen!" Her voice rose to a near shriek.

William stirred. He could hardly move, he was wrapped in so many blankets.

"I think he's hot," Esme continued, and the broken despair in her voice caught Sebastian's heart. She put a trembling hand to the baby's head. "I keep feeling his head and one moment I think he's caught a fever, and the next he seems to be perfectly all right. What do you think,

Sebastian?"

"I'm hardly an expert." He cautiously felt William's forehead. It felt sweaty to him. "Do you think he might be wearing a few too many blankets? There's quite a fire in here, after all."

"No, no," Esme said, tucking his blankets around him even more securely.

"Why don't you ask your nanny?" Sebastian asked, inspired.

"I sent her to bed. She's too old to be awake at night."

"The nursemaid, then? Surely you have some help at night."

"I sent the woman away. She just didn't understand babies. She didn't understand William, not at all. She never forgave me for nursing him myself, and she was always trying to bathe him in the midst of a cold draft."

"Oh," Sebastian said. He fished in his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief.

Esme wiped her eyes. "She kept talking about strengthening him. But William is far too frail to be exposed to drafts, or to the fresh air. Why, she actually wanted to take him outdoors! She was being grossly imprudent, and I had to tell her so."

She sniffed, and a few more tears rolled down her cheeks. "And thenand then she said that William was as fat as a porkchop and didn't have a cold at all. It was as if she'd never been around babies at all! Any fool could hear that William was having trouble breathing when he's asleep."

William snored peacefully. Sebastian looked closely at Esme and was shocked. All the generous lushness in her face was gone, replaced by a drawn exhaustion and a brutal whiteness. "Poor darling," he said. "You're all topped out, aren't you?"

"It's just that it's so tiring! No one understands William, no one! Even nanny keeps saying he's a brawny boy and I should just leave him in the nursery at night. But I can't do that, Sebastian, you must see that. What if he needed me? What if he were hungry? What if his cold worsened, or his blankets slipped?"

Sebastian pushed himself back against the headboard and then gently

pulled Esme into his arms. She leaned back with a great, racking sigh, her head falling on his shoulder.

"He's a bonny lad," he said.

"Yes." She was utterly exhausted. He could see violet shadows under her eyes. Slowly he curled an arm around her and eased her back more comfortably against his shoulder. "Rest," he said softly.

"You shouldn't be here!" she said, sitting up again. "My motherwell, surely you met my mother at dinner. She's come for a visit."

Sebastian had decided not to say a word about Esme's mother. "She can have no idea that I'm in your chamber. Rest, Esme."

William snored on. After a few moments, Esme's long eyelashes fluttered closed and her body relaxed against his. Sebastian waited for a few minutes more, eased her back against the pillows, and gently took William from her arms.

Esme's eyes popped open. "Make sure you hold his head up," she said Wearily. "Tuck in his blankets."

"I will," Sebastian said soothingly. "Lie down."

"You mustn't forget to prop up his neck," she insisted, but she was already toppling to the side, her whole body a testament to acute exhaustion.

Sebastian experimented cautiously for a moment and discovered what she was talking about. William's head seemed to be too heavy for his body. "I hope you outgrow this problem," he told the baby, walking over to the rocking chair by the fire. Perhaps it was just because the child was sleeping.

In the light thrown by the firelight, he could see two things. One was that William was definitely overheated. His hair was damp with sweat and his cheeks were rosy. But it didn't look like a fever; it looked as if four blankets were too much. He gently loosened some of the blankets, and it seemed to him that the baby was a little more comfortable. The second thing he noticed was that William did indeed look like Miles Rawlings. His eyes were closed, of course, but surely those were Miles's plump cheeks and Miles's rounded chin? Even the fact that William had no hair seemed evocative of Rawlings's balding state.

So Sebastian, Marquess Bonnington, rocked the baby in front of the fire and thought hard about how much he wanted the child to be his, because he hoped that if the child was his, Esme couldn't deny him fatherhood. But fatherhood wouldn't be enough anyway. He looked over at the utterly silent mound of womanhood in the bed. He didn't want Esme as a wife merely because she felt it necessary to give his son a father.

He wanted Esme to love him for himself, love him so much that she braved scandal. It was almost comical. How on earth had it happened that he, an excruciatingly correct marquess whose ideas of propriety were so rigidly enforced, had ended up asking a lady to disregard social mores, cause a scandal of profound proportions, and marry him?

And more to the point, how was he to get her to that point? He knew instinctively that it was no use asking her to marry him again. She cared only for William at the moment. Somehow, he had to bring her around to see him as a man again. And herself as a woman, as well as a mother. Sebastian rocked and thought, and William snored.

Chapter 35

Lady Beatrix Entertains

Bea had never allowed a gentleman to repeat the experience of bedding her, she had no idea whether she was expected to articulate a further invitation, or whether Stephen would take it for granted that he could knock at her bedchamber door. He had given no sign of his intentions over dinner. But fairness led her to admit that there was little he could have done, since he was seated between Arabella and Fanny. The two ladies spent dinner hissing insults around his shoulders, and ignoring his attempts at polite conversation. Bea's own enjoyment in the meal was dimmed when she distinctly heard Esme's mother reproach Arabella for allowing Bea to live in the same house with the pure little soul in the nursery .

Bea clenched her fists at the memory. Could she possibly marry Stephen? She, with her tarnished reputation and a malevolent influence that apparently extended to babes in the nursery? She

dismissed the thought for the four hundredth time. Tonight was just another seduction, not a wooing. And she had dressed for that seduction or undressed, howsoever one wished to put it. After all, her flimsy negligee was, well, flimsy. And she was painted, and perfumed, and curled to within an inch of her life. The only thing that seemed to calm her was applying another layer of kohl to her eyelashes, or adjusting the candles so that they fell on the bed just so. For a while she lay on the bed in a posture that displayed her entire body to its best advantage, but her stomach was jumping so much that she had to hop off the bed and pace.

There was nothing to worry about. The candles were lit, and she was perfumed in every conceivable spot that he might wish to kiss. She'd even placed a glass of water next to the bed, as she'd felt appallingly thirsty after their encounter in the goat pasture. But should she have arranged two glasses of water there, offering him one? Or would that look too rehearsed?

By the time the knock came on her door, Bea was more overwrought than she'd ever been in her entire life. "One moment!" she croaked, flinging herself toward the center of the bed. To her horror, the edge of her trailing sleeves caught the glass of water. It arched through the air, splashing water as it flew, and ended up on the bed next to her hip.

"Damnation!" Bea cried, under her breath. There was another discreet knock on the door. Of course Stephen didn't want to stand about in the corridor: what if he were seen by Helene, Esme or a rather more terrifying possibility Esme's mother?

"Enter!" she called hoarsely, rolling on top of the wet spot and positioning herself on her side with a hand propping up her head. Her hair was falling in the right direction to be enhanced by the pearl blue of her negligee, but she was uncomfortably aware of dampness soaking through the said garment.

He walked through the door looking as urbane and composed as if he often conducted this sort of excursion. Which, of course, he did, Bea reminded herself. Stephen was the man with two mistresses and a fiancée, after all.

"Good evening, lovely Bea," he said, closing the door and walking over to the bed.

Bea cleared her throat. "Good evening," she managed, with reasonable

serenity. She looked surreptitiously down her body and was horrified to see that the silk of her negligee was apparently soaking up the water from her coverlet. Just at her hip there was a spreading patch of dark greenish-looking silk. Quickly she pulled the silk behind her and rolled onto her back so that her bottom covered the spilled water.

"And how are you, sir?" she said, smiling up at Stephen. He had seated himself on the side of the bed and was looking at her with a rather quizzical expression.

"The better for seeing you," he said.

What was that in his eyes? Bea wiggled a little. Her bottom was growing distinctly damp. Who would have thought there could be that much water in one glass?

He leaned forward and dropped a kiss on her forehead. "My word, that's a very elegant perfume you're wearing," he whispered against her cheek.

He was hovering above her. Perhaps she should give him a kiss? She brushed her lips over his, but he pulled back suddenly and sneezed. Bea sat up, realizing as she did so that she was now damp all the way to the small of her back. If she didn't change clothing, she would be sneezing as well.

"Excuse me," he said, bracing a hand on the bed and reaching into his pocket, presumably for a handkerchief.

Bea shivered. His shoulders and the way his neck rose out of his shirt. Who would have thought Stephen Fairfax-Lacy was a symphony of muscle under all that linen? She was trembling, literally trembling, to take off his clothes again. She leaned toward him. "I missed you during dinner," she said. The naked longing in her voice was rather embarrassing. Why hadn't he given her a proper kiss?

He frowned, held up his hand and said, "Bea, your coverlet appears to be rather damp."

Bea bit her lip. "I spilled a glass of water."

"Ah." He bent close to her again and—sneezed. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "I'm terribly sorry to say that I— achoo !"

"You caught a chill in the pasture," Bea said, her heart sinking.

"Not I." He looked at her and smiled. For the first time since he entered the room Bea felt a rush of confidence. His smile said volumes about the cut of her bodice. She shifted slightly, just enough so the neckline fell off her shoulder.

The look in his eyes was dark and seductive. Bea quivered all over. Her knees suddenly felt weak, and her breath disappeared. A strong hand rounded her ankle, and the melting sensation crept up to her middle. He was on the bed now, leaning over her; Bea raised her arms to pull that hard body down on hers and

He sneezed again.

"You are ill!" Bea said with anguish as he pulled away again.

Stephen almost wished he were. But there was no way he was leaving the room without tasting Bea's perfect little body. "It's the perfume," he admitted.

Bea's eyes widened. "My perfume?"

He nodded.

"One moment. I shall" She scrambled off the bed and headed toward her dressing table and the pitcher of water that stood there. She began pouring water into a bowl.

Stephen swallowed. The backside of her negligee was drenched. The wet silk clung to the middle of her back, clung to the round curve of her ass, to a secret curve that turned inward, drawing a man's eye. He was off the bed in a moment, splaying his hand across that sweet bottom, eyes meeting hers in the mirror.

"Stephen!" she cried, shocked.

"Yes, Bea?" he said with a grin, his fingers slipping over the wet silk, letting the cool fabric rumple against his fingers, against the smooth skin of her bottom as he curved his fingers in and under. Silk met silky flesh and her head fell back against his shoulder. Stephen reached around her with his free hand and scooped water from the bowl.

"This may be chilly," he murmured, opening his hand on the smooth column of her neck. Her eyes flew open and she began to protest, but he had her now, wet silk over one breast, and wet silk below, and both hands slipping and rubbing. Her head fell back again and she made that little throaty moan he loved. It sounded different in a

bedchamber than it had in the pasture: less thin, more deep with womanly delight. She was liquid in his arms, and the chilly silk was taking heat from her burning skin.

She turned in his arms, and her curious eyes, always so vigilant, so watchful, so wicked, were dazed. He kissed her fiercely and she begged him without words, so he cupped her bottom and pulled her hard against him.

But he couldn't concentrate because of the damn perfume, so he pulled the negligee over her head in a moment, took more water, and used his fingers as a facecloth. He started at her neck, at the smooth skin just under her ears, water dripping from his fingers, shaping her body, singing over her skin, licking kisses from his fingers. Over her collarbone, down her arms, back to her breasts, further down. He was on his knees, and the water came with him, cooling her burning skin until he worked his way up her legs and there, then and there, his control snapped.

Bea was throbbing so much that she felt unable to speak or move. She hardly noticed when he picked her up and put her down on the wet part of the bed. She scarcely realized that he had shed his clothing. She was too busy twisting toward him. But then he was pushing her legs apart, and that dark head was there, and she was quivering, crying, pleading

Then he cupped her face in his hands and pressed his lips to hers, and she opened to him as gladly as she wound her legs around him, as joyously as she surged against him, with as much urgency as she shattered around him, waves of pleasure flooding to the very tips of her fingers.

Chapter 36

Because It Takes Courage to Admit a Mistake

The following afternoon

Marchioness Bonnington was having a most unusual sensation. It took Honoratia quite a while to identify precisely what it was: not an

incipient warning of gout, not an attack of indigestion, not a premonition that rain would soon fall. It wasn't until the gentlemen had retired to take port and the ladies to take tea in Lady Rawlings's private sitting room that Sebastian's mother knew exactly why she had a queasy feeling in the back of her stomach. There was a chance a slim chance, but a chance nonetheless that she was Making a Mistake.

An odd sensation, Honoratia considered. One with which she, for obvious reasons, had very little familiarity.

Mistakes seemed to generate an oddly bilious sensation in her middle section. She had it every time she looked at Lady Rawlings, who had joined them for supper on the first occasion since her child was born. She was astonishingly beautiful, that girl. Her skin had a magnolia creaminess to it. The ripeness on those lips didn't come from a bottle. Overall, though, the marchioness thought that Esme Rawlings probably gained most of her appeal from her nature, from those clever, laughing remarks of hers. From the way her eyes lit up with pleasure when she mentioned her baby.

Fanny clearly did not approve of her daughter's nature. She visibly stiffened every time Lady Rawlings laughed. "Modulate your voice, my dear," Honoratia had heard her snap during dinner. "A lady finds little to laugh at in a strident fashion."

"I'm sorry, Mother," Lady Rawlings had said instantly. She was trying so hard to make this reconciliation a success. But Honoratia thought the chances were slim.

"I find that dress rather unappealingly low in the chest," Fanny announced as soon as the ladies seated themselves.

Lady Rawlings gave the bodice of her gown an uneasy little tug. "It's only because my bosom is enhanced by the situation."

"Yes, you have gained some flesh," Fanny said, eyeing her up and down. "Perhaps a brisk walk every morning. A diet of cucumbers and vinegar can be efficacious. Dear Mr. Brummell confided in me that even he has occasionally undertaken a slimming project."

"Oh, I couldn't do that," her daughter said with a smile. "Mama, may I give you a lemon tartlet?"

"Absolutely not. I never partake of sweets in the evening. And I certainly hope you won't take one yourself."

Honoratia swallowed a smile as Lady Rawlings quickly transferred the tartlet she was about to put on her own plate to that of Lady Godwin.

"Why should you not try a cucumber diet?" Fanny insisted. "I judge you to be in rather desperate need of a slimming plan."

"It's not advisable for nursing mothers to undertake such a drastic step."

Lady Bonnington had always counted herself dear friends with Fanny, but as it happened, this was the first time they had encountered each other at the same house party. It was a bit demoralizing to realize that after a mere two days, she already recognized the thin white lines that were appearing next to Fanny's mouth as a sign of temper.

"Helene, did I understand you to say that you are leaving us?" Lady Rawlings said, turning to Lady Godwin.

"I'm afraid I must," Lady Godwin said quickly, demonstrating that she too had come to understand the signs that indicated Fanny's impending attack of temper. "Gina, the Duchess of Girton, writes me that she is expecting a child and she would be grateful for companionship. I am planning to take a carriage in two days, if you have no immediate need for my presence."

"Nursing mother? That must be some sort of witticism you thought up to horrify me," Fanny said acidly, ignoring her daughter's diversionary tactics. "My stomach is positively turning at the very thought." And she looked it. Honoratia thought there was a fair chance that Fanny would lose her supper.

"Mama, perhaps we could discuss this at a later time," Lady Rawlings said pleadingly, putting her arm on her mother's sleeve.

She shook it off. "I shall not be fobbed off. And I am certain that these ladies are as repulsed by what you said as I am!"

Honoratia took a sip of her tea. When Lady Rawlings first demanded to nurse her baby, she had been repulsed, certainly. The very idea of allowing a child to munch from one's private parts was instinctively revolting. But then she had been in the nursery yesterday while Esme nursed William, and it was hard to reconcile that experience with her own repulsion.

"While I am quite glad to have utilized a nursemaid myself," she announced, "I do not find Lady Rawlings's actions distasteful."

Fanny flashed her a hostile look that had Honoratia stiffening. Didn't Fanny realize that she was of far lower rank than she, Marchioness Bonnington? Why, it was pure kindness on her part that kept the friendship intact.

"Be that as it may," Fanny said with frigid severity, "the majority of the polite world agrees with me. Are you telling me that the fleshy expanse of chest that you are exposing to the world is due to this unsavory practice, Esme?"

Lady Rawlings sipped her tea quietly. "Yes it is, Mama."

Honoratia had to admit, Esme Rawlings had backbone.

"Had I ever been blessed by a child, I hope I would have had the courage to be as excellent a mother as is Esme," Arabella put in.

Her sister turned to her with the lowering look of a striking serpent. "It was the will of God that you not be given children, and no more than you deserve!"

Arabella went pure white, rose from her chair and walked out. There was no sound other than a faint swish of silk and then the click of the door shutting behind her.

"That was most unkind," Lady Rawlings said, looking straight at her mother. "It was unworthy of you."

"I spoke the truth as I saw it."

"I would urge you to apologize to Aunt Arabella. She has a forgiving soul, and if you make haste, she may overlook your unkindness."

Fanny merely took a sip of tea. There was a suppressed air of triumph about her. "Now," she said brightly, "you must all forgive us for this unwarranted display of poor judgement. I assure you that our family is not generally so rag-mannered!"

But her daughter was standing up. "You will have to forgive me," she said to the company at large. "Mama, I know you will act as a hostess in my absence. I shall speak to my aunt." And she was gone.

Fanny turned to Lady Beatrix Lennox. "As my sister's *dame de compagnie*," she said with a sapient smile, "perhaps you would like to join her, given that my daughter seems to think that Lady Withers might be distressed?"

Lady Beatrix gave her a stony look and stood up, curtsying. "I can think of little that would give me greater pleasure."

"Now we can be cozy," Fanny said, once the door closed again. "I find the presence of impure women to be extremely trying on my nerves. One has such an impulse to help, and yet no help is ever enough. Once lost, a woman's reputation can never be recovered." She shook her head. "I fear it is all a question of nature. Clearly, my daughter inherited my sister's disposition."

That was the moment when Lady Bonnington discovered what it felt like to have Made a Mistake. She accepted a tart from Fanny while she thought about it.

Countess Godwin was a lovely, if rather pale, woman. Yet when she leaned forward, Honoratia caught her breath. In profile, the countess looked like an accusing angel, a stone statue of Saint Michael standing at the gates of Paradise with a sword. "I wish you to be the first to know," she said, speaking with great precision.

"Oh?" Fanny said, looking a bit uneasy.

"I am having an affair with your daughter's fiance, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy. We enjoy each other in ecstatic union every night."

Fanny gasped. "What a thing to say to me!" she said shrilly.

"If it be sin to love Mr. Fairfax-Lacy well, then sin I!" retorted Lady Godwin. She stood up. "I expect my presence will make you uncomfortable, so I shall leave."

Honoratia raised her eyebrows. There was something distinctly odd about the phrasing of Lady Godwin's parting shot. And as someone who'd watched many a marriage and many a sinful union, she doubted that Lady Godwin had ever experienced ecstatic union. Still, loyalty was an admirable quality, and Lady Godwin had it in spades.

Fanny had stopped looking horror-struck and was eating one of those lemon tartlets that she never consumed in the evening. They were left alone, two hardened old harridans with shining reputations and naught much else. Neither of them had had an illicit proposal in years.

Fanny patted her mouth delicately. "I wonder that you chose this house to retire from the season, dear Honoratia," she said. "I leave tomorrow at dawn to return to Lady Pindlethorp's house. I told Esme as much this morning, and now my mind is made up. You would be

more than welcome to join me."

"Wouldn't you rather stay and make further acquaintance with your grandson?"

"It's far, far too painful. My daughter has no understanding of the grief I still bear every time I think of my dear departed son. And I am very much afraid that my initial qualms about my daughter's rehabilitation are entirely correct. I admire your generous nature, my dear, but you are far too optimistic. Are you aware that my daughter has no real idea whose child she birthed?"

"Certainly not!" Honoratia replied in her most quelling tone of voice. Surely surely Esme's own mother wouldn't repeat such a vicious piece of gossip about her own daughter.

Fanny took a bite of tartlet. "I queried her on the matter, most discreetly, you understand, through the post. She did not respond to my query, which speaks for itself, does it not? This tea is quite cold." She rang the bell. "As I said, I would be more than welcome for your company tomorrow morning."

Honoratia stood up. Fanny looked up, startled. Honoratia thumped her stick, and, sure enough, Fanny quailed with as much fear as any lazy housemaid. "You will not say a word to anyone about your grandson's patrimony," she ordered.

"Well, naturally, I" Fanny said, flustered. "I only tell you as you are a very close friend!"

"From this moment, we are not close friends," Honoratia said, pulling herself even straighter. "In fact, we are not friends at all. If I ever hear a breath of scandal about your daughter or your grandson that has begun at your lips, Fanny, I shall ruin you."

Fanny stared up at her, faded eyes wide.

"Do I make myself clear?"

Fanny jumped but said nothing.

"Do I make myself clear?" Honoratia said, with the snap of a carnivorous turtle.

Fanny twittered. "I can't imagine why you would think that I would ever do something as ill-bred as gossip about my daughter's debased

circumstances." Then she faltered, seeing Honoratia's expression. "I shall not!" she said shrilly.

Honoratia didn't bother with a reply. She just stumped over to the door and left Fanny there among the crumbs of lemon tarts and cooling cups of tea.

Chapter 37

Nights of Ecstatic Union

"And then I said that we spend every night in ecstatic union with each other!"

"Ecstatic what?" Esme asked.

"Ecstatic union. It was the only thing that came to mind. It is a rather odd phrase, is it not? And then I quoted a bit of the poetry Bea lent me, the part being a sin to love. Your mother was quite horrified, Esme." Helene looked triumphant.

Esme choked with laughter. She was sitting on her aunt's bed, arm wound around her aunt's neck. Helene was standing before them like a militant, raging angel. Bea was curled up on the little armchair to the side.

"You didn't have to do that," Arabella said damply, blotting a last few tears with a handkerchief. "Drat! I've taken off all my facepaint. I must look a veritable hag."

"You look beautiful," her niece said, giving her a squeeze.

"Fanny really doesn't mean to be so horrible," Arabella said. "She's had a most difficult life."

"Yes she does," Helene said firmly. "I'm sorry, Lady Withers, but your sister is a truly poisonous woman. And I'm sorry for you, too, Esme."

Esme looked up with a rueful smile. "And what a dreadful thing in a daughter to agree with you." But she didn't disagree either.

Arabella gave a last sniff. "I haven't cried for years," she said, "so I

suppose I was due for a bout of tears. Fanny's comments generally don't distress me very much. But Robbie and I did so want children. I thought perhaps when he died well, I didn't have my flux for months. And I thought that perhaps I carried a bit of Robbie with me." She gave another sniff. "But finally the doctor said that it must have been due to grief." She wiped away some tears. "What a wet blanket I've become!"

"You're not a wet blanket," Esme said. "You're one of the bravest people I know."

Arabella chuckled damply. "Well, that's a new compliment for me. Thank you, my dear."

Esme's own smile wavered. "And the dearest as well. No mother could have helped me more than you have, Arabella, nor a sister more than you, Helene." She met their eyes, and now they were all a little teary.

"I couldn't have loved a child more than I love you, dearest," Arabella said.

Helene sat down hard on Arabella's dressing table stool. "Do you still feel a great deal of grief due to not having a child, Lady Withers? If you don't mind my asking?"

Arabella gave her an unsteady smile. "It is not terrible, no. But it is a sadness to me, since I would have been delighted to be a mother. Yet just having the chance to be with William is very healing in that respect."

Helene pressed her lips together. "I want you all to know that I am going to have a child."

Unexpectedly, Bea, who'd been sitting silently to the side, yelped, "What? " And then clapped her hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry! It's none of my business."

"My dissipated husband returned to London still refusing to divorce me, and I have decided to have a child irrespective of my marital situation. If Rees wishes to divorce me after the fact, on the ground of adultery, I truly don't give a bean."

"Would you then marry Mr. Fairfax-Lacy?" Bea asked. The strain in her voice made all three women look at her.

"Stephen? No!" Helene said. "Stephen has no aspirations to my hand."

Or bed, for that matter, although he was kind enough to pretend so before my husband." There was a pause. "Are you going to marry him?"

Bea swallowed and then looked to Esme. "Lady Rawlings has precedence."

Esme laughed. "I surrender my claim."

"Then I am," Bea said sedately. A smile was dawning on her face. "I am going to marry him."

"Bravo!" Arabella said, tossing her handkerchief onto her dressing table. "I knew the man was good marrying material. Didn't I tell you so, dear?" she said to Esme.

"I merely have to ask him," Bea put in.

Helene blinked at her. "Hasn't he asked you ?"

"Not in so many words. He wishes to be wooed."

"What an extraordinary thing," Helene said slowly. "Do you know, I am coming to have an entirely different idea of how to behave around men?"

Arabella nodded. "If you wish to have a child, you will need to move decisively. That's why I married so quickly after Robbie died. I wasn't in love, wasn't even in my right head, I think now. But I wanted a child. Mind you, it didn't work for me, but it might well for you."

Helene nodded. "You may not wish to acknowledge me in the future," she said, looking at Esme. "I will create a tremendous scandal by having a child. Everyone in the polite world knows that I have no contact whatsoever with my husband."

Esme stood up and gave her a fierce hug. "You never deserted me, and I would never desert you. What would I have done without you and Arabella these past few months? Besides, I do believe I shall give up some of my aspirations to respectability."

"Thank goodness!" Arabella said, with a world of meaning in her voice.

Helene turned to Bea. "I trust you don't mind my saying that you are very inspiring. I mean to copy down that poem, if you don't mind."

Perhaps I shall have use for it another day."

Bea grinned. "As long as you are not planning to direct your invitation to Mr. Fairfax-Lacy, you may use it as you please."

"How are you going to ask him to marry you?" Esme asked, fascinated.

Bea bit her lip. "I only just this moment decided to do so. I really don't know."

"Poetry," Helene said positively. "Obviously, you must use poetry."

Esme clapped her hands. "We'll have a small party tomorrow night, just amongst ourselves, and we shall complete the poetry reading that we began."

"That means I shall have to find an appropriate poem."

Bea said. "I suppose I had better hie me to the library." She looked at Esme. "You didn't read a poem at our last such reading."

"I haven't such a pressing need as yourself," Esme said lightly.

"Humph," Arabella snorted. "That's one way of putting it."

Esme frowned at her.

"Well, you've got an eligible man visiting your chambers on the sly," Arabella said irrepressibly. "You might as well let him make an honest woman of you."

Bea's eyes grew round. "Which man?"

Arabella replied. "The marquess, naturally."

Helene laughed. "Oh Esme," she said, "you are truly Infamous Esme, are you not?"

"I most certainly am not," Esme said with dignity. But all her friends were laughing, so after a bit she gave in and laughed as well.

Chapter 38

Mrs. Cable was rather scandalized to find that she was attending a poetry reading. But while inviting the Sewing Circle, Lady Rawlings had noted that she herself intended to read from the Bible, and Mrs. Cable had decided that encouragement of such a devout practice was a virtue. And if she was honest, she was finding the presence of the scandalous Marquess Bonnington rather enthralling. He was, well, wickedly attractive. Mrs. Cable secretly thought that she'd never seen anyone quite so mesmerizing: those dusky golden curls, and he had such a powerful body! Although she hardly put it to herself like that. In truth, Mrs. Cable had some difficulty dragging her eyes away.

There certainly was enough to see at this particular gathering. She was absolutely certain that Lady Beatrix, for example, had reddened her lips, if not worse. Naturally Lady Winifred was having the time of her life trundling around the room with her dear friend Arabella. It was quite a sorrow to see how susceptible Lady Winifred was to the lures of the fashionably impure. And Mr. Barret-Ducrorq was almost as bad. He seemed to be fascinated by Lady Withers, and Mrs. Barret-Ducrorq had had to call her husband to heel quite sharply. Mrs. Cable looked with satisfaction at her own husband. He was sitting next to her, nursing his brandy and looking stolidly bored. Mr. Cable had attended the reading only after bitter protest; he did not consider poetry to be palatable entertainment.

Lady Rawlings clapped her hands. "For those of you who have recently joined us, we have been entertaining ourselves in the evening by giving impromptu poetry readings. We shall have two readings this evening. First Lady Beatrix will read a piece from Shakespeare, and then I shall read a piece from the Bible."

Mrs. Cable felt cheered. She must have had an influence on the young widow. Shakespeare and the Bible: what could be more unexceptional than that? Lady Beatrix walked before the group and stood in front of the fireplace. She was wearing a dinner gown of moss silk, in a bright rose color. Of course, the bodice bared far more of her neck and bosom than Mrs. Cable considered acceptable. But Lady Beatrix looked nervous, which Mrs. Cable counted in her favor. A young lady entertaining a group of distinguished guests ought to be fairly shaking with fright.

And, indeed, had she but known, Bea was literally trembling. She kept sneaking glances at Stephen, but he hadn't even smiled at her. There

was nothing in his demeanor to indicate that he had spent virtually the whole of last night in her bed. "I have chosen a dialogue," Bea told the assembled company, "from Romeo and Juliet ."

"An excellent choice," Lady Bonnington commented. "I am very fond of Mr. Shakespeare's works. I don't hold with those who criticize him for frivolity."

"I suppose you need a man for your dialogue," Esme said. "Do choose a partner, Bea."

My goodness, but Esme's eyes had a wicked suggestiveness to them, Bea thought. It would serve her right if she chose Marquess Bonnington, if she stole Esme's supposedly unwanted suitor from under her nose. Naturally Esme was cushioned between the two most eligible men in the room. She had Stephen on her left and Marquess Bonnington on her right.

But Bea didn't chose Bonnington, of course. She turned to Stephen and gave him a melting smile. "Mr. Fairfax-Lacy, would you be so kind?"

His face gave nothing away. He came to his feet with easy grace and accepted the open book she handed him.

"We'll read from the balcony scene," she told him.

"Very good! Very good!" Lady Bonnington trumpeted. "I've always been fond of ' Wherefore art thou, Romeo' ?" She turned to her son. "Do you remember when we saw Edmund Kean perform as Romeo last year, dear?"

Sebastian frowned at her. He had the feeling that something quite important was happening and more important it looked to be the kind of event that might derail Esme's patently artificial engagement to Fairfax-Lacy. Lady Beatrix seemed to be a handful, but the way Fairfax-Lacy was looking at her, he was ready to take on the task.

Meanwhile Stephen looked down at Bea and felt as if his heart would burst with pure exhilaration. She was wooing him, his own darling girl had decided to woo him. He glanced down at the book. "' But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.' " His eyes told her silently the same things he read:

She was his east, his sun, his life. But she hardly glanced at him, the silly girl, just kept looking at her book as if she might lose courage.

Bea gripped her book as if holding its pages would force her fingers to stop trembling. She was doing it: she was stealing him, taking him, ruining him" ' Good night, good night!' " she said steadily, " ' As sweet repose and rest come to thy heart as that within my breast!' " She risked a look at him. The tender smile in his eyes was all she ever wanted in life. She took a deep breath and kept reading until there it was before her. She glanced at the group watching: met Esme's laughing eyes, and Helene's steady gray ones, Sebastian Bonnington's sardonic, sympathetic gaze, and Lady Bonnington's look of dawning understanding. Then she turned back to Stephen.

She had no need of the book, so she closed it and put it to the side. " ' If that thy bent of love be honorable,' " she said clearly, ' " thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow ' "

But his voice joined hers as he held out his hands. " ' Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite, and all my fortunes at thy foot I'll lay, and follow thee my lord throughout the world.' "

"I will," Stephen said, smiling at her in a way that broke her heart and mended it again, all in one moment. "I will, Bea, I will."

"You will?" she asked with a wobbly smile, clinging to his hands. "You will?"

"What's that? Part of the play?" Mr. Barret-Ducrorq said. "Quite the actor, isn't he?"

"I will marry you," Stephen said. His voice rang in the room.

Bea's knees trembled with the shock of it. The smile on her lips was in her heart. She'd wooed a man. His mouth was hungry, violent, possessive, and she nestled into him like the very picture of a wife.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Stephen said a moment later. He turned, his arm snug around Bea. "May I present the future Mrs. Fairfax-Lacy?"

Esme was laughing. Marquess Bonnington bellowed, "Good man!" Even Lady Bonnington gave a sedate little nod of her head, although she quickly turned to Esme. "You would appear to have lost your fiance," she observed. And then, "How fortuitous that your mother left this morning."

"Yes, isn't it lucky," Esme said, smiling at her.

Stephen pulled Bea away to sit next to him on the settee, where he

could presumably whisper things in her ear not meant for public discussion. Esme straightened her shoulders. Her heart was hammering in her chest from nerves. "I shall read from the Bible," she said, picking up the book from the table and walking to the front of the room. It was Miles's Bible that she carried, the family Bible, into which she had written William's name. But she had the feeling that Miles approved, almost as if he were there in the room, with his blue eyes and sweet smile.

"It is a pleasure to see a young widow immerse herself in the Lord's words," Mrs. Cable said loudly. "I believe I have set an example in that respect."

"You're not a widow yet," her husband said sourly.

Sebastian was the picture of sardonic boredom. Obviously he thought that Esme was merely cultivating her Sewing Circle, quoting the Bible in the hopes of polishing her reputation. Esme swallowed. He was looking down at his drink, and all she could see was the dark gold of his hair. "I shall read from the Song of Solomon," she said. Sebastian's head swung up sharply.

" ' The song of songs, which is Solomon's, ' " she read, steadying her voice. " ' Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine. ' "

"Didn't she say that she was going to read from the Bible?" Mr. Barret-Ducrorq asked, in great confusion.

"Hush!" Lady Bonnington said. She was sitting bolt upright, her stick clutched in her hands. Her eyes were shining and wonder of wonders she was smiling.

Esme kept reading. " ' Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love. ' "

Abruptly Sebastian stood up. Mrs. Cable was looking at him. Esme looked at him too, telling him the truth with every word she read. " ' My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. ' "

He strode toward her, skirting his mother's chair, the settee, Mrs. Cable sitting in rigid horror.

" ' For lo, the winter is past, ' " Esme said softly, only for him. " ' The rain is over and gone; The flowers appear on the earth. ' "

He was there before her, taking the book away, taking her hands in his large ones. She looked up at him.

" ' My beloved is mine, and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies.' "

His arms closed around her with hungry violence. A shudder ran through Esme's body as she lifted her mouth to his. How could she ever have thought that anything mattered more than Sebastian, her love, her deep center, her heart.

He tore his mouth from hers for a moment. "I love you," he said hoarsely.

Joy raced through Esme's body, sang between them.

"And ' I am sick with love for you' " she said softly, repeating the beautiful old words of the ancient book.

Mrs. Cable's mouth snapped shut. She grabbed her husband by the arm and hauled him to his feet. "I am appalled!" she hissed. "Appalled!"

Lady Rawlings didn't heed her, crushed as she was into that degenerate marquess's arms. Mrs. Cable could see what had happened. She had lost the battle for the widow's soul, yes, and the devil had won. Lust and Lasciviousness ruled this house.

"We are leaving!"

She turned to go and found her way blocked by Marchioness Bonnington. "I pity you!" Mrs. Cable croaked, narrowing her eyes. "But perhaps your son is well matched by such a lightskirt."

"I daresay he is," the marchioness replied. There was something in her eyes that gave Mrs. Cable pause. "Surely you wish to give the happy couple your congratulations before you leave so precipitously?"

But Mrs. Cable had a backbone to match the marchioness's. "I do not ," she said, fixing her beady eyes on Lady Bonnington. "And if you would inform your dissolute daughter-in-law that her services are no longer desired in the Sewing Circle, I would be most grateful."

The marchioness stepped back, something to Mr. Cable's relief. He was beginning to fear that his wife would actually pummel a peeress of the realm.

"I should be most happy to fulfill your request," Lady Bonnington said.

The smile that played around the marchioness's mouth so enraged Mrs. Cable that she didn't even realize for several hours that the rest of her Sewing Circle had not followed her from the room.

Alas, it was the demise of that excellent institution.

A month or so later, Mrs. Cable began a Knitting Circle drawn from women in the village, priding herself on bringing the Lord's words to illiterate laborers. Without her leadership, the Sewing Circle drifted into dissolute activities such as attending Lady Rawlings's wedding to the degenerate marquess. Society noted that Lady Rawlings's mother did not attend. But the smiling presence of Marchioness Bonnington, and the weight of her formidable power in the ton, established the marriage as the most fashionable event of the season.

Rather more quietly, Lady Beatrix Lennox married Mr. Fairfax-Lacy from her own house, with only her immediate family in attendance. It was rumored that her only attendants were her sisters, and that they wore daisy chains on their heads, which sounded odd indeed. The newly wed couple returned to London, and by the time that society really noticed what had happened, and with whom, the new Mrs. Fairfax-Lacy proved to have such powerful friends that hardly more than a murmur was heard of her blackened reputation. Besides, the Tory party quickly realized that she showed considerable potential as a political wife.

Helene, Countess Godwin, traveled to attend her friend the Duchess of Girton's confinement. Through the whole summer and fall she brooded on the child she was determined to have. By hook or by crook, with the help of her husband, or without him.

But that's a story for another day

The First Epilogue

Plump as a Porker

Esme started awake, as always, with a bolt of fear.

Where was William? Was he all right? A second later she realized that

what had woken her was a chuckle, a baby's chuckle. The curtains were open and early sunlight was streaming into the room. Sebastian was standing in front of the window, wearing only pantaloons. His shoulders were a ravishing spread of muscles. And there, just peeking over his left shoulder, was a tiny curled fist, waving in the air.

A cascade of baby giggles erupted into the room.

Sebastian was dancing William up and down on his arm. The question of chilly drafts leaped into Esme's throat. She never let William go anywhere near a window. But then it felt as if high summer had come. Sebastian spun around and William screamed with laughter. He was sitting on the crook of Sebastian's arm, and he wasn't even wearing a nappy.

Esme's heart skipped a beat. She never took all William's clothes off at once!

But the baby was clutching Sebastian's hair and squealing. Sebastian obligingly bounced him up into the air again. Esme found herself looking at a stunningly beautiful man, all muscles and smooth golden skin, and tumbling curls.

And then, suddenly, she looked at William. It was rather like looking sideways and suddenly catching sight of oneself in the mirror without recognizing who it is. Because the naked man in her bedchamber was holding one of the fattest, healthiest, happiest babies she'd ever seen.

That was William. Her sickly, fragile son?

Esme's mouth fell open.

Sebastian still didn't know she was watching. He was holding William in the air and laughing up at him. Pudgy little legs kicked with delight, "You love that, don't you, son," he said. And every time he jiggled William, the baby giggled and giggled. Until Sebastian nestled him back against his chest. It was when Sebastian was kissing William's curls that he caught sight of Esme's wide eyes.

He was clearly unsure of Esme's reaction to William's undressed state. "He loves it, Esme," he said quickly. "See?" And he tickled William's plump little tummy. Sure enough, William leaned back against his shoulder and giggled so hard that all his fat little bits shook with delight. And there were many parts jiggling.

"He is healthy, isn't he?" Esme said with awe.

"He's a porker," Sebastian said.

"Oh my goodness," Esme breathed. "I justI didn't"

Sebastian brought William over to the bed. "I promise you that he's not chilled, Esme. Not in the slightest. I never would have removed his clothes if I thought he might take a chill."

William lay on the coverlet kicking his legs and waving his arms, gleefully celebrating freedom from three layers of woolens.

"It's summer, Esme," Sebastian said gently. "Roses are blooming in the arbor. And I do believe some exercise will do him good." He rolled the baby over. William squealed with delight and then poked up his large head inquisitively. "He's gaining some control over his neck," Sebastian said, looking as pleased as if William had taken a top degree at Oxford University.

Esme opened her mouth and stopped.

The sun was shining down on the sturdy little baby's body, on his brown hair that was so like his father Miles's hair. Onto his unsteady head, blue eyes blinking up at Sebastian with precisely the sweetness that Miles had given to him.

And there, at the very base of his spine, was a small spangled mark. A mark that hadn't been there at his birth, but was indubitably present now.

"Sebastian," she said quietly. There was something in her voice that made him turn to her immediately. "Look."

Sebastian stared at the bottom of his son's spine and didn't say a word.

"What do you think?"

"I think it looks very much like the mark I have at the base of my spine," he said slowly. He looked puzzled rather than joyous. Then, after a moment, he laughed. "I was right! He may have suddenly become my blood relation, but I already loved him with every bit of my heart."

Esme looked up at him, eyes brimming. "Oh, Sebastian, what would I ever do without you?"

He stared at her for a moment, and then a little crooked smile curled

his mouth. "I won't answer that, because it will never happen."

William rolled over, his naked little arms waving in the air. His mama and papa weren't watching him wave at the dust fairies playing in a ray of sunshine. They were locked in each other's arms, and his papa was kissing his mama in that way he had: as if she were the most delectable, desirable, wonderful person in the world. And she was kissing him back, as if she would throw away the world and all its glories merely to be in his arms.

William giggled again and kicked the air, scattering dust fairies like golden stars in all directions.

The Second Epilogue

In Which a Puritan Loses His Reputation

It was high summer. The air was heavy with dust and smoke, and the streets smelled of ripe manure. The odor crept into the houses of the very rich, even into an occasion as grand as Lady Trundlebridge's yearly ball, where bunches of lavender could do nothing for the stench. "Paugh!" exclaimed the Honorable Gerard Bunge as he held a heavily scented handkerchief to his nose. "I cannot abide the end of the season. Even I must needs think of the country, and you know I loathe the very sight of sheep."

"I feel precisely the same way," his cousin, Lady Felicia Saville, sighed, fluttering her fan so quickly that it would have ruffled hair less severely tamed by a curling iron. "London is simply abominable at the end of the season." She straightened and snapped shut her fan, making up her mind on the moment. "I shall leave for the country tomorrow, Gerard. The season is over. This ball, for example, is unutterably tedious."

Gerard nodded. "Nothing left but the dregs of gossip, m'dear. Did you catch a glimpse of Fairfax-Lacy and his bride?"

"A doomed marriage," she said, with some satisfaction. Alas, Lady Felicia Saville was something of a personal expert on the subject. "A man of such reputation marrying the notorious Lady Beatrix!" Her high-pitched laughter said it all. "Do you know, I believe I saw Sandhurst earlier. Perhaps she will recommence her alliance now she

is safely married. Given Lady Ditcher's interruption, I would say their encounter left, shall we say, something to be desired?"

Gerard tittered appreciatively. "You do have a way with words, Cousin. Look: Lady Beatrix is dancing with Lord Pilverton. She is rather exquisite; you can't fault Sandhurst for taste."

But Felicia had never been fond of musing over other women's attractions, particularly those of women like Lady Beatrix, who appeared to have a flair for fashion rivaling her own. "I should like to walk in the garden, Gerard," she commanded.

"My red heels!" he protested. "They're far too delicate for gravel paths."

"And far too out of fashion to protect. This year no one wears red heels other than yourself, although I haven't wanted to mention it." And she swept through the great double doors into the garden, her cousin reluctantly trailing behind her.

They weren't the only people to escape the stuffy ballroom. The narrow little paths of Lady Trundlebridge's garden were fairly heaving with sweaty members of the aristocracy, their starched neckcloths hanging limply around their necks. Stephen Fairfax-Lacy, for example, was striding down a path as if he could create a breath of fresh air just by moving quickly. Bea had talked him into giving up his pipe, and while he thought that it was a good idea on the whole, there were moments when he longed for nothing more than the smell of Virginia tobacco. Thinking of Bea, and pipes, he turned the corner and found himself face-to-face with

Sandhurst.

Bea's Sandhurst. The man disreputable enough to seduce a young girl in a drawing room. The man who'd ruined Bea's reputation.

Sandhurst was a sleek-looking man, with his hair swept into ordered curls and a quizzing glass strung on his chest by a silver chain. He took one look at Fairfax-Lacy and didn't bother with prevarication. "I offered to marry her," he said, his voice squeaking upward.

Stephen didn't even hear him. He was stripping off his coat. There was a reason why he'd trained in Gentleman Jackson's boxing salon, day after day for the past ten years. True, he hadn't known what it was, but now he realized.

"Mr. Fairfax-Lacy!" Sandhurst squealed, backing up. "Couldn't we simply discuss this like gentlemen?"

"Like what?" Stephen asked, advancing on him with the slow, lethal tread of a wolf. "Like gentlemen?"

"Yes!" Sandhurst gulped.

"You forfeited that title a few years ago," Stephen said, coming in with a swift uppercut. There was a satisfying thunk of fist on bone. Sandhurst reeled back, hand to his jaw.

"Fight!" yelled an enthusiastic voice at Stephen's shoulder. He paid no mind. His arm shot out. A sledge-hammer, in Jackson's best manner. Sandhurst fell back, tripped, and landed on his ass. Stephen was conscious of a thrum of disappointment. Was the man simply going to stand there and play the part of a punching bag? He watched dispassionately as Sandhurst picked himself off the gravel.

There was a growing circle around them in the shadowy garden, calling to each other to discover who was in the fight, hushing to a whisper as the relation between the two men was explained. A voice bellowed from behind Sandhurst: "For God's sake, man, pull yourself together!" Others joined in, rather like a crowd at a cockfight. "Show yourself a man, Sandhurst! By God, you're nothing more than a nursling! A molly! A" Stephen blanked the voices from his mind and watched his opponent, who was being goaded into a decent effort. He was pulling off his jacket with the air of a maddened bull.

I think, a nobber, Stephen thought. Yes, and then a left hook. And after that, he dodged a hit, feigned right, launched a chop at Sandhurst's jaw. Took one himself in the right eyedamn, now Bea would demand an explanation. The irritation he felt at that translated to his right arm: a leveller, and Sandhurst dropped to the ground like a fallen tree. Stephen nudged him with his foot to make sure he was completely out, looked up, and caught the eye of his hostess. She deliberately threw up her fan and said something Stephen couldn't hear to the lady beside her, who laughed shrilly and said, "It's what comes naturally after associating with the House of Commons!"

He was picking up his coat when he felt a hand on his arm. "Mr. Fairfax-Lacy," said Lady Felicia Saville, her voice sweet as honey. "Would you be so kind as to escort me to the house?"

Stephen bowed. Apparently barbarousnay, common—behavior was the way to this gentlewoman's heart. "If you will allow me to replace

my jacket," he said.

"Hardly the behavior of the prudent man of Parliament," Felicia laughed up at him as they strolled back toward the house, quite as if nothing had taken place at all. "You will be quite the man of the hour."

"I highly doubt that. I'm afraid Lady Trundlebridge did not appreciate my behavior." He didn't feel like a Member of Parliament. He felt damn nearexuberant.

Felicia shrugged. "You were defending your wife's honor. Any woman of sense must applaud you, sir!" There was a flutter of warmth in Felicia's stomach when he smiled at her compliment. Perhaps once Lady Beatrix returned to her wandering ways, she could comfort Beatrix's neglected husband.

Just inside the ballroom doors, Stephen bowed. "If you will excuse me, Lady Felicia, I shall locate my wife."

He walked away without a backward glance, leaving Felicia with her mouth all but hanging open. Why had she never noticed how muscled and attractive the man was? She turned to meet the curious eyes of one of her bosom friends.

"Did you see the fight itself?" Penelope squealed. "Is it true that he called Sandhurst a blathering blackguard?"

Felicia's eyes were still a little dreamy. "Now there's a man worth having," she whispered to Penelope. "He was like a medieval knight protecting his wife's honor. He flattened Sandhurst!"

"Do you think he means to keep it up?" Penelope giggled. "Unless marriage changes Lady Beatrix's nature, he's going to be a busy man."

Felicia was watching his dark head as he made his way to the other side of the room. "She'd be a fool to stray," she sighed.

Bea was growing a little tired. Her shoes pinched loathsomely, and thanks to an overly energetic waltz, Pilverton had left a damp patch from his hand on the back of her gown. She turned gratefully at the sound of her husband's voice, and then gasped. "Stephen! What on earth happened to you?"

But he was grinning. "Nothing important. Are you ready to leave, m'dear? It's damnably hot in here."

"Stephen!" Bea said, her voice rising. "You tell me this moment what you've been up to."

"Making a spectacle of myself," he told her obligingly. "Fistfight in public. Shouldn't wonder if my reputation for tolerant debate isn't ruined ." He said it with distinct relish, towing her out of the ballroom as he spoke. "I think it's time to retire to the country."

"We can't go to the country yet," Bea said, stopping and looking up at him suspiciously. "The House isn't closing session for at least a week." His eye was growing darker by the moment. "Just who have you been tussling with? Don't tell me you actually resorted to blows over that Enclosure Act?"

He reached around behind her and opened the door to the library. When she was inside, he leaned against it and grinned at her. "Something of the kind," he drawled.

"Really!" Bea said, rather amused. "It's hard to believe that solid, respectable members of Parliament can bring themselves to violence." And then, "What on earth are you doing, Stephen?"

He had turned the key in the lock. "I'm not a solid, respectable member, Bea. I'm resigning tomorrow morning, and I won't stand for reelection either." There was a sound at his back.

"Someone wishes to enter," Bea observed. "Stephen!" For he was walking toward her with an unmistakably lustful glint in his eye. There was something tantalizing about the air of wild exuberance that hung around him. "Did you take a blow to the head?" Bea asked, her voice rising to a squeak.

"No," he said, and his voice was rich with laughter. There was a bang at the door. "It's Fairfax-Lacy," he bellowed. "I'm in here kissing my wife. Go make yourself useful by telling Lady Trundlebridge."

There was a sound of rapidly retreating footsteps, and then the room was quiet but for the faint hum of the ball continuing on the other side of the house.

"Stephen Fairfax-Lacy!" his wife gasped.

"I'm a madman in love with my wife." He had her now, cupping her face in his hands. "I do believe I shall make love to you at Lady Trundlebridge's ball, and ruin my reputation for once and for all." One hand slid to her breast, and that rush of melting pleasure that came at

his slightest touch rushed down Bea's legs. He kissed her until she was limp, until he had backed her onto a couch, until she was gasping, pink in the cheeks, almostalmost lost.

"Stephen," she said huskily, removing his hand, which had somehow managed to get under her gown and was touching her in a flagrantly ungentlemanly fashion.

"Darling." But he was busy. The necklines of Bea's gowns were so useful that he didn't know why he'd ever thought they were too low. They were perfect.

She pushed at his shoulders. Something was prickling the back of her mind. "Stephen, with whom precisely did you fight?"

He raised his head and looked at her. His right eye was almost swollen shut, but the gleam of desire was there. He feathered his lips over hers.

"Stephen!"

"Sandhurst," he said obligingly.

Bea gasped.

"We were fighting over an Enclosure Act, just as you guessed. I'm like all those nasty sheep farmers, Bea. You're mine. I've enclosed you."

"Butbut"

"Hush," he said and kissed her again.

Bea looked up at him, and there were tears in her eyes. "Oh Stephen," she whispered. "I love you."

"Can we go home now, Bea? We've been in London for a month and have been received everywhere. I've tramped off to the House and listened to assinine debates. Our marriage didn't ruin my career. In fact, with the way Lord Liverpool looks at you, I stand to be named to the cabinet if I'm not smart enough to resign quickly."

She smiled at him mistily. "Are you saying I told you so?"

"With any luck, I just ruined my career," he said, kissing her. "Now may we leave London, please? Shall we go home and chase each other around the billiards table, and start a goat farm, and perhaps a baby, and make love in the pasture?"

Bea wanted to weep for the joy of it, for her luck in finding him, for the bliss of realizing he was right. He was right . She hadn't ruined his career. "Oh, Stephen," she said huskily, "I do love you."

"I made you woo me," he said, looking into her eyes. "I think it's time that I courted you, don't you think?" His arms closed around her, arms that would never abandon her, and never let go. "Roses at dawn," he whispered into her ear, "daisy chains for lunch, champagne in your bath."

Bea swallowed hard so she wouldn't cry. "I love you," she said again.

"I think Romeo said it best," her husband said, brushing his lips over hers. "You are, indeed, my love, my wife ."

A Note on Shakespeare and his Wilder Brethren

The last words of *A Wild Pursuit* were written by Shakespeare, and spoken by Romeo. I decided to close the novel with Romeo's farewell to his bride because Renaissance poetry is so important to this book as a whole. Bea uses Romeo and Juliet to propose to Stephen Fairfax-Lacy; Esme uses the King James version of *The Song of Solomon* to propose to Sebastian Bonnington.

But the book is also punctuated by works far less known than these two famed pieces of love poetry. Richard Barnfield published only two books of verse, which appeared in 1594 and 1595, precisely when *Romeo and Juliet* was likely first performed. For their time, both Shakespeare's play and Barnfield's poetry were shockingly original. Juliet's proposal to Romeo, not to mention the speech in which she longs for their wedding night to begin, both startled and delighted London audiences. *Romeo and Juliet* was a howling success; ten years later, young courtiers were still quoting the play to each other on the street. Its popularity is attested to by the fact that in 1607 a company of boys put on the stage a play called *The Puritan* , which contains a riotous parody of Juliet's balcony scene. Some lines from that play are used by Esme to poke fun at *Romeo and Juliet* , precisely as the original boy actors did back in 1607.

Richard Barnfield's poetry was, in a different fashion, as shocking as Shakespeare's portrayal of Juliet. The book that Bea brings with her to Esme's house party was an odd amalgam of love poetry and narrative verse. Amongst the various odes and lyrics Barnfield wrote are some of the most beautiful, sensual, and explicit poems written before the

twentieth century. As you can perhaps tell from the reaction Helene has to reading aloud a Barnfield poem, neither Renaissance nor Regency readers were accustomed to expressing in public a wish that My lips were honey, and thy mouth a bee . I sometimes receive letters from readers contending that aristocrats living in the Regency period would have acted with propriety at all times, even in the privacy of their own bedchambers. I thought it well to present some poetry written over two hundred years before the Regent took the throne. Barnfield may have been one of the first Englishmen to put this desire in print; he was neither the first, nor the last, to express it.

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Ramsey Sage

CONFIDENTIAL!

in The Thing About Men

by Elizabeth Bevarly

Coming January 2004

Name: Ramsey Sage

Nickname: Too nasty to mention here

Hometown: Prefers to forget

Car: No car; rides a Harley

First kiss: Can't remember

Super secret: Undercover cop

And they were going to have a lot more to chat about than Claire had initially thought, too. Like how his arrival had made this temporary arrangement with Anabel suddenly seem much less temporary.

"Is Anabel here?" Mr. Sage asked before making a move to enter.

"Not yet," Claire told him. "It's taken nearly a week to get everything worked out with the authorities in North Carolina. But I spoke with the social worker assigned to the case yesterday, and he said he'd be here with her this afternoon. I'm actually expecting them anytime now. It was rather fortuitous that you were located as quickly as you were."

And also rather amazing, especially since no one seemed to know why Ramsey Sage had been drunk in a seedy bar in an obscure village in Central America when they found him. Nor did anyone seem to know

how he had gotten there. Even Chandler's private detective still had a lot of pieces missing from the puzzle that was Ramsey Sage, because Ramsey Sage himself had evidently been no help at all providing any answers. It was something Claire decided not to think about, mostly because it didn't bode well for his being named Anabel's permanent guardian.

"Please come in," she invited Ramsey Sage again, stepping aside to offer a physical punctuation mark to the invitation.

But he hesitated for a moment, as if he were reluctant to enter. He surveyed what he could see of the big house from his place on the front porch, and when his gaze returned to hers, Claire could see from his expression that he didn't approve. Why he wouldn't approve, she couldn't imagine. It was certainly a vast improvement over the crowded, spartan institution where she'd grown up, and the tiny, spartan apartment she and Olive had shared in college. She'd made the place as warm and inviting as she could, especially on the inside, and she couldn't imagine why anyone especially a harsh, raggedy, beat-up man like Ramsey Sage would disapprove.

Although he smiled at her again as he took a step forward, the naturally breezy grin he had displayed a moment ago was gone, and the one he wore now was decidedly more manufactured. Claire tried not to notice how the air around her seemed to come alive as he passed. She couldn't help noticing, though, how he smelled of heavy machinery and raucous man and endless summer nights, a combination she found strangely appealing since she'd never been drawn to any of those things before. Oh, certainly she enjoyed a summer evening as much as the next person, but she couldn't imagine anything that might make one seem endless.

Then Ramsey Sage looked at her again with his smoldering green gaze, and she suddenly had a very good idea indeed what might make a summer night seem to go on forever, an especially graphic, surprisingly explicit idea, in fact, one that had her squirming on her flowered chintz sofa beneath Ramsey Sage, her blouse gaping open, her skirt hiked up over her hips, her brassiere pushed high, her pearl necklace clenched in his teeth as he tore it from her neck and sent the perfect little beads scattering across the Oriental rug and hardwood floors before dragging his hot mouth across her collarbone and down between her breasts, moving over to close his lips over one nipple, tugging her inside, laving her, licking her, tasting her deeply, and then and then and then

And, good heavens , where had such a thought come from? Claire wondered as she shook the image out of her brain. Heat flooded her cheeks, and her lips parted in shock, and she hoped like hell that Ramsey Sage couldn't tell what she was thinking about. Because not only did Claire normally not think about such things in such detail, she didn't think about them in mixed company. And she certainly didn't think about them with men like Ramsey Sage cast in the role of seducer.

Seducer nothing, she thought as she closed the door behind him, wishing she could close the door on her rampant thoughts as easily. Ramsey Sage looked like the kind of man who would take whatever he wanted, whoever he wanted, whenever he wanted, the rest of the world be damned. And the wantee, Claire was certain, would go along quite willingly, and when it was over, be left feeling as if she had just experienced the highest summit of joy.

She followed Mr. Sage into the living room, but following him left her gazing, however involuntarily, at his backside—all right, so maybe it wasn't all that involuntary and she couldn't help noting, dammit, that his backside was every bit as noteworthy as his front side had been. Because his faded jeans hugged his taut hindquarters and strong thighs with much affection, and his denim work shirt strained against the muscles of his broad back. His arms were nicely bulked with sinew without being overblown, his biceps and forearms curving appreciably with muscle, his skin bronzed and powerful beneath that oddly erotic, barbed-wire tattoo.

And, strangely, Claire found herself wanting to trace the circumference of that tattoo with her fingertips, and oh, my, but that endless-summer-night thing was starting up again, growing more and more graphic and explicit in her mind—and on her body, too, she had to admit with every passing moment.

Clink, clink, clink went the chains on his boots as he walked.

And zing went the strings of her heart.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Sage?" she said as he continued across the living room to where Chandler stood to greet him upon his arrival. And also as she continued to ogle his backside. "This is Handler, ah, I mean Chandler . Chandler Edison. He's my, um my attorney."

Boy, she was really going to have to be careful. Because in addition to misintroducing Chandler by a moniker that had been what Claire was

thinking about doing to Mr. Sage's backside, she had almost called Chandler her "buttorney." That would have really been embarrassing.

"Mr. Edison, good to finally meet you," Ramsey Sage said as he approached Chandler, politely extending his hand again, and surprising Claire once more with his manners.

"Mr. Sage," Chandler replied as he shook the proffered hand, though with none of the easiness Ramsey Sage exhibited, and with all of the reluctance one might expect of Chandler, seeing as how he had a nasty aversion to denim.

"Call me Ramsey," Ramsey told Chandler. Then he turned to Claire and added, "You, too, Miss Willoughby."

Claire told herself to extend the same courtesy to him, but something prohibited her. She wasn't sure she could be responsible for her actions if she heard her given name spoken in that dark, velvety baritone of his. So she only nodded her acknowledgment of his comment and decided to skirt the issue as best she could by calling him nothing at all. The last thing she needed to do anyway was slip up and address him as Mr. Hunka Hunka Burnin' Love.

And just what had gotten into her anyway? she demanded of herself. This was getting silly. Ramsey Sage was a walking, talking warning label for decent women everywhere. He was unkempt, unclean, and uncompromising. Not to mention potentially dangerous. She was probably crazy to even invite him into her home, whether he approved of it or not. And she was even crazier to think there was any chance he would be able to care for Anabel. She bit back the panic that began to rise in her throat and wondered what she was supposed to do. If Ramsey Sage couldn't take on the care and feeding of his niece, then who could? Claire certainly didn't want to be responsible for the little girl any longer than she had to be. She didn't know the first thing about children.

How had she gotten into this mess? And more to the point, what was she going to do to get out of it?

Jack Parrish

CONFIDENTIAL!

in Daisy's Back in Town

by Rachel Gibson

Coming February 2004

Name: Jackson Lamott Parrish

Nickname: Jack

Hometown: Lovett, Texas

Car: Red '63 T-Bird with red interior

First kiss: Daisy Lee Brooks in her cute little cheerleader uniform

Super secret: Has been known to hang out at The Road Kill bar

"My, my," his voice drawled in the darkness, "if it isn't Daisy Lee Brooks."

It had been fifteen years, and his voice had changed. It was deeper than the boy she'd known, but she would have recognized that nasty tone anywhere. No one could pack as much derision into his voice as Jack. She'd understood it once. Known what lay behind it. She didn't kid herself that she figured him out anymore.

"Hello, Jack."

"What do you want, Daisy?"

She stared at him through the screen and shadows, at the outline of the man she'd once known so well. The knot in her stomach pulled tighter. "I wanted to I need to talk to you. And I thought" She took a deep breath and forced herself to stop stammering. She was thirty-three. So was he. "I wanted to tell you that I was in town before you heard it from someone else."

"Too late." The rain pounded the rooftop and the silence that stretched between them. She could feel his gaze on her. It touched her face and the front of her yellow rain slicker, and just when she thought he wasn't going to speak again, he said, "If that's what you came to tell me, you can go now."

There was more. A lot more. She'd promised Steven that she'd give Jack a letter he'd written a few months before his death. The letter was in her purse; now she had to tell Jack the truth about what had

happened fifteen years ago, then hand over the letter. "It's important that I talk to you. Please."

He looked at her for several long moments, then he turned and disappeared into the depths of his house. He didn't open the screen for her, but he hadn't slammed the wood door in her face, either. He'd made it clear that he was going to be as difficult as possible. But then, when had he ever made things easy?

Just as it always had, the screen door squeaked when she opened it. She followed him through the living room toward the kitchen. His tall outline disappeared around the corner, but she knew the way.

The inside of the house smelled of new paint. She got an impression of dark furniture and a big-screen television. The outline of Mrs. Parrish's piano pushed against one wall, and she wondered briefly how much had changed since she'd last walked through the house. The light flipped on as she moved into the kitchen, and it was like stepping into a time warp. She half expected to see Mrs. Parrish standing in front by the almond-colored stove, baking bread or Daisy's favorite snicker doodle cookies. The green linoleum had the same worn patch in front of the sink and the countertops were the same speckled blue and turquoise.

Jack stood in front of the refrigerator, his top half hidden behind the open door. His tan fingers curled around the chrome handle, and all she could really see was the curve of his behind and his long legs. One pocket of his snug Levi's had a three-corner tear, and the seams looked like they were almost worn through. Adrenaline rushed through her veins, and she balled her hands into fists to keep them from shaking.

Then he rose to his full height, and everything seemed to slow, as if someone flipped a switch on a movie projector. When he turned and shut the refrigerator door, holding a quart of milk in one hand by his thigh, her attention momentarily centered on the thin line of dark hair rising from the waistband of his jeans and circling his navel. She lifted her gaze past the hair on his flat belly and the defined muscles of his chest. If she'd had any lingering doubts, seeing him like this removed them. This was not the boy she'd once known. This was definitely a man.

She forced herself to look up past his strong chin, the etched bow of his tan lips, and into his eyes. She felt the back of her throat go dry. Jack Parrish had always been a good-looking boy, now he was a lethal man. One lock of his thick hair hung over his forehead and touched

his brow. Those light-green eyes and long black lashes that she remembered, that had once looked at her so full of passion and possession, watched her as if he were no more interested in seeing her than a stray dog.

"Did you come here to stare?"

She moved farther into the kitchen and shoved her hands into the pockets of her raincoat. "No, I came to tell you that I'm in town visiting my mother and sister."

He raised the milk and drank from the carton, waiting for her to elaborate.

"I thought you should know."

His gaze met hers over the carton, then he lowered it. Some things hadn't changed after all. Jack Parrish, bad boy and all around hell-raiser, had always been a milk drinker. "What makes you think I give a shit?" he asked and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

"I didn't know if you would. I mean, I did wonder what you'd think, but I wasn't sure." This was so much harder than she'd envisioned. And what she'd envisioned had been pretty dang hard.

"Now you don't have to wonder." He pointed with his milk carton toward the other room. "If that's all, there's the door."

"No, that's not all." She looked down at the toes of her boots, the black leather spotted by the rain. "Steven wanted me to tell you something. He wanted me to tell you that he's sorry about everything." She shook her head and corrected herself. "No was sorry, I mean. He's been gone seven months and it's still hard for me to remember him in the past tense. It seems wrong somehow. Like if I do, he never existed." She looked back at Jack. His expression hadn't changed. "The flowers you sent were really nice."

He shrugged and set the milk on the counter. "Penny sent them."

"Penny?"

"Penny Colten. Married Leon Cribs; she works for me now."

Well, Penny hadn't sent them and signed his name without his knowledge. "Thank Penny for me."

"Don't make it a big deal."

She knew how much Steven had once meant to him. "Don't pretend you don't care that he's gone."

He raised a dark brow. "You forget I tried to kill him."

"You wouldn't have killed him, Jack."

"No, you're right. I guess you just weren't worth it."

The conversation was headed in the wrong direction, and she had to turn it around. "Don't be ugly."

"You call this ugly?" He laughed, but not with pleasure. "This is nothing, buttercup. Stick around and I'll show you how ugly I can get."

She already knew how ugly Jack could get, but while she might be a coward, she was also as stubborn as ragweed. Just as Jack was not the same boy she'd once known, she was not the same girl he'd once known, either. She'd come to tell him the truth. Finally. Before she could get on with the rest of her life, she had to tell him about Nathan. It had taken her fifteen years to get to this point, and he could get ugly all he wanted, but he was going to listen to her.

A flash of white caught the corner of Daisy's eye a second before a woman entered the kitchen wearing a man's white dress shirt.

"Hey y'all," the woman said as she moved to stand by Jack.

He looked down at her. "I told you to stay in bed."

"I got bored without you."

Heat crept up Daisy's neck to her cheeks, but she seemed to be the only embarrassed person in the room. Jack had a girlfriend. Of course he did. He'd always had a girlfriend or two. There had been a time when that would have hurt.

"Hello, Daisy, I don't know if you remember me. I'm Gina Brown."

It didn't hurt any longer, and Daisy was a bit ashamed to admit to herself that what she mostly felt was an overwhelming relief. She'd come all the way from Seattle to tell him about Nathan, and now all she felt was relief. Like an axe had been lifted from her throat. She guessed she was more of a coward than she thought. Daisy smiled and moved across the kitchen to offer Gina her hand. "Of course I

remember you. We were in American Government together our senior year."

"Mr. Simmons."

"That's right."

"Remember when he tripped over an eraser on the floor?" Gina asked, as if she weren't standing there wearing Jack's shirt and, Daisy would bet, nothing else.

"That was so funny. I just about"

"What the hell is this?" Jack interrupted. "A damn high school reunion?"

Both women looked up at him and Gina said, "I was just being polite to your guest."

"She isn't my guest and she's leaving." He pinned his gaze on Daisy, just as cold and unyielding as when she'd first walked in the door.

"It was nice to see you, Gina," she said.

"Same."

"Good night, Jack."

He shoved his hip into the counter and crossed his arms over his chest.

"See you two around." She walked back through the dark house and out the door. The rain had stopped and she dodged puddles on her way to her mother's Caddie parked on the side of the garage. Next time, she would definitely call first.

Just as she reached for the door, she felt a hand on her arm, whipping her around. She looked up into Jack's face. Security lights shined down on him and the angry set of his jaw. His eyes stared into hers, no longer cold but filled with a burning rage.

"I don't know what you came here looking for, absolution or forgiveness," he said, his drawl more pronounced than before, "but you won't find it." He dropped her arm as if he couldn't stand the touch of her.

"Yes, I know."

"Good. You stay away from me, Daisy Lee," he said. "You stay away or I'll make your life a misery."

She looked up into his dark face, at the passion and anger that had not abated in fifteen years.

"Just stay away," he said one last time, before turning on his bare heels and disappearing into the shadows.

She knew she would be wise to heed his warning. Too bad she didn't have that option.

Although he didn't know it yet, neither did he.

Stephen Fairfax-Lacy

CONFIDENTIAL!

in A Wild Pursuit

by Eloisa James

Coming March 2004

Name: Stephen Fairfax-Lacy

Nickname: The Puritan

Hometown: London

Car: A sleek carriage with fine horses

(it is the Regency, after all!)

First kiss: A gentleman does not tell such things

Super secret: Would like to begin a scandalous affair

The Puritan had arms like steel. He didn't pay a bit of attention to her wiggling, just picked her up and turned her around and then when she looked up at his face, she suddenly stopped protesting.

He didn't kiss like a Puritan. Or an old man either.

He kissed like a hungry man. Bea's first sensation was triumph. So the Puritan had pretended that he didn't notice her charms. Ha! That was all an act. He was just the way he was just like but then somehow, insidiously, she lost her train of thought.

He was kissing her so sweetly, as if she were the merest babe in arms. He didn't even seem to wish to push his tongue into her mouth. Instead he rubbed his lips against hers, danced on her mouth, his hands cupping her head so sweetly that she almost shivered. She quite liked this.

Oh, she felt his tongue. It sang on her lips, patient and tasting like raspberries. Without thinking, her own tongue tangled with his for a second. Then she realized what she was doing and clamped her mouth shut. There was nothing she hated more than a man pushing his great tongue where it didn't belong.

But he didn't. He just nibbled her lips, and his mouth drifted across her face and pressed her eyes shut, and then closed back on hers with a ravenous hunger that made her soften, ache deep inside.

He probably thinks I'm a virgin, Bea thought in a foggy sort of way.

His mouth was leaving little trails of fire. He was nibbling her ear and she was tingling all over. In fact, she wanted—she wanted him to try again. Come back, she coaxed silently, turning her face toward his lips. Try to kiss me, really kiss me. But he didn't. Instead his tongue curled around the delicate whorls of her ear, and Bea made a hoarse sound in her throat. He answered it by nipping her earlobe, which sent another twinge deep between her legs.

He tugged her hair and she obediently tipped her face back, eyes closed, and allowed him to taste her throat, all the time begging silently that he return, return, kiss her again. But he seemed to be feasting on her throat and he hadn't even tried to touch her breasts. Men always

But that was the thought that woke Bea. She hadn't been thinking of grappling in the field when she dressed in the morning. These particular breasts aren't meant to withstand a man's hand. There was more cotton than flesh.

She opened her mouth to say something but at that moment he apparently decided he had tormented her enough and his mouth closed over hers.

She could no more fight that masculine strength than she could rise to her feet. He didn't coax this time; he took, and she gave. And it wasn't like all the other times, when she tolerated a moment or two of this kind of kissing. The Puritan's kiss was dark and sweet and savage all at once. It sent quivers through her legs and made her strain to be closer. His hands moved down her back, assured, possessive. In a moment he would bring them around to her front, and her breasts were aching for

Except those breasts were covered by wads of cotton.

She tore her mouth away, gasping and stared at him. She didn't even think about giving him a seductive glance. She was too stunned.

"I like you when you're like this," he said, and there was that sweetness to his eyes again. He reached out and rubbed some rain from her cheeks. "You look rain-washed and very young. Also rather startled. It seemed to me that you've been inviting kisses. Was I wrong?"

"No," she said, trying hard to think what to say next. All her practiced seductive lines seems to have fled from her head.

"Alas," he said, even more gently, tucking her hair behind her ear. "I can hardly offer marriage to a woman half my age. So I'm afraid that I shall have to leave your kisses, sweet though they are, to some younger man."

Bea's mouth almost fell open. Marriage? Didn't he know who she was? "I don't want" she began, but her voice was hoarse. She stopped. "As it happens, I am not interested in marriage either," she said quite sedately. "I find that I am, however, very interested in you ." She twisted forward and kissed his lips, a promise of pleasure. And she was absolutely honest about that. With him, there would be no boundaries.

But it was he who pulled back. She had been so sure he would lunge at her that she smiled but the smile faded.

He was a Puritan. His eyes had gone cold, dark, condemning. "I thought you played the lusty trollop for fun."

She raised her chin. Her chest had gone icy cold. "Actually, no," she said, and she was very pleased to find her tone utterly calm and with just a hint of sarcasm. "I play myself."

"Yourself? Do you even know who you are, under all that facepaint?"

"I assure you that I do."

"You play a part you needn't," he said, eyes fixed on hers. "You are young and beautiful, Beatrix. You should marry and have children."

"I think not."

"Why?"

"You simply want to make me like everyone else," she said sharply. "I like wearing macquillage. I would rather not look like myself, as you put it. And I find it incalculably difficult to imagine myself sitting by the fire wearing a lace cap and chattering about my brood of children."

"I think yourself is beautiful. All your paints have washed away at the moment. You never needed them."

"I didn't say I needed them. I enjoy them," she retorted, and then added, deliberately, "Just as I occasionally enjoy the company of a man in my bedchamber."

For a moment they just looked at each other, Puritan to trollop. "Am I to take it that you are not interested in taking a mistress?" she asked steadily, meeting his eyes. She was no child to be whipped by his condemnation.

"Actually, I am," he said deliberately. "But I have little interest in one so practiced."

Bea got to her feet, shaking out her skirts. Then she bent over and picked up her mangled spencer, shaking it out and folding it over her arm, taking a moment to make absolutely certain that her face wouldn't reveal even for a second what she felt.

Then she looked him straight in the face. "That was cruel, and quite shabby, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy. I would not have expected it of you."

"I'm sorry."

She nodded and began to turn toward the gate. After all, she'd had much worse things said to her, mostly by women, but then there was her dear father. So when he caught her arm, she turned toward him with a little smile that was almost genuine.

"Don't you think we should take our bedraggled selves home?"

It was rather amusing to see how badly he felt. There was real anguish in his eyes. "I feel like the worst sort of bastard. Kissing you in a field and then insulting you."

At that, she grinned. "I gather you wish I were an innocent, Mr. Fairfax-Lacy. But I am not. I truly enjoyed that kiss." The smile she gave him was as wicked and lazy as any she'd ever bestowed on a man. "And I would very much have enjoyed your company in my bedchamber as well. But I have never forced myself on a man. I fully understand that you are looking for a far more respectable mistress. Perhaps even a possible marriage partner, given your wish for inexperience?"

Men were such dolts! He stared at her as if she were as alien as that hairy goat.

"It was a lovely kiss," she said. Then she turned and made her way across the field, and when the goat rolled his wicked eyes and snapped his lips over a Pomona green satin ribbon, all that remained of her bonnet, she just smiled at him.

Which startled the animal so much that he galloped off to the other end of the field, leaving her hat behind.

Rees, Lord Godwin

CONFIDENTIAL!

in Your Wicked Ways

by Eloisa James

Coming April 2004

Name: Rees, Lord Godwin

Nickname: The Sinner

Hometown: London

Conveyance: Anything that he can ride fast

First kiss: He'd rather think about his best kiss

Super secret: He's developed a passion for his own wife

"I had no idea that this part of Hyde Park existed," Helene said with fascination, a short time later. The grasses to either side of the little winding path had grown so tall that they touched the slouching limbs of the huge oaks. Daisies poked their heads above the seas of grasses like intrepid soldiers, fighting off nettles and thistles growing breast high.

"I've never met another soul here," Rees said. "All the polite sort prefer raked gravel paths."

Sometimes the oak trees bent down as if they'd been humbled, brushing their branches to the ground, and then suddenly they would fall back, leaving a patch of emerald green grass, or a cascade of daisies. Within twenty minutes, she could no longer hear any din from the city at all, no sound of carriages, bells, or whistles. "It's like being in the country," she said, awed.

They rounded the bend and the trees trailed off again, forming another clearing. "Just look, Rees! Aren't they beautiful?" she cried, running into the middle of a lake of frothy white flowers shaped like stars.

Rees stood on the path, his face unreadable. The sun fell relentlessly on his harsh face, on the lines around his eyes, the scowling eyebrows, the generous lower lip, those two dimples

And Helene realized with a great thump of her heart that she'd never gotten over that first infatuation with him, that first blinding passion that had driven her out her bedchamber window, and into his carriage, the better to make their way to Gretna Green.

She almost dropped the flowers she held, the realization was so blinding.

When Rees appeared at her side, hamper in hand and sat next to her on the grass. Helene couldn't even bring herself to speak. She'd spent nine years telling herself that the brief infatuation that led to their elopement was a dream, a fribble, a moment's blindness.

But it wasn't. Oh, it wasn't.

Numbly she helped Rees pull a tablecloth from the basket and load it with pieces of chicken, pie, fruit, and a bottle of wine.

She refused a glass of wine. "Hair of the dog," Rees said, "and very nice hair it is." He grinned at her. He had a chicken leg in his hand and was eating it like a savage. And he had that wicked look about him again, the one that made her think about the muscles hidden by his white shirt.

To her surprise, Helene found that she was hungry. She put a plate of chicken on her knee and began struggling to cut it properly.

"Don't bother," Rees said lazily. He was lying on his side, looking twice as comfortable in a bed of flowers as he did in a drawing room. "Just eat it, Helene."

She looked at him with disdain. "I don't eat with my fingers. I discarded that habit in the nursery."

"Who's to see? There's only you and I, and we're nothing more than an old married couple."

Old married couple implied comfort and ease, and she didn't feel any of that with Rees, particularly with the secret prickling awareness she had of his body. He had removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeve and his bronzed arm lay all too close to her. "It seems to me that you are always removing your clothing," she told him, eyeing him with distinct hostility. How dare he be so comfortable, while she was both over-heated and hungry? Her beautiful little blue jacket felt altogether winterish with the sun shining on her back.

In answer, he sat up. Helene edged back. Rees was overpowering at close quarters. "Here," he said simply, holding the chicken leg to her lips.

"I couldn't!" But she hadn't eaten all day. Her stomach gave a little gurgle.

Rees laughed. "Go ahead. There's no one to see."

"You're here," she said mulishly.

"I don't count," he said, giving her an oddly intent look. "That's one of the nicer things about being married, I always thought."

She took a bite. The chicken was delicious, faintly reminiscent of

lemon. "It's exquisite," she admitted, taking another bite.

"I pay my cook one hundred guineas a year," Rees said, ripping off a little strip of chicken and bringing it to her lips.

When she didn't open her mouth immediately, he rubbed the chicken on her lip. "Oh my, your lips are greasy," he said, leaning closer.

"Oh!" Helene said, licking her lips.

"Very nice," Rees said, and there was a dark, velvety something in his voice that made the little coil in Helene's stomach grow tighter.

"Give me a real kiss, Rees," she said.

His hand was stroking her neck. It froze for a moment.

"Do you remember how you used to kiss me before we were married?" she asked.

"Aye," he said, "I must have been a beast, always pulling you into a corner"

"I loved it," Helene admitted.

"You never"

"Ladies don't."

But Rees had clear memories of his wife refusing to kiss him with an open mouth, telling him he was disgusting to want such a thing. He hesitated. Their newfound friendship was so fragile and (although he didn't really want to think such a thing) important to him. He didn't

So she came to him. The wife who hated kissing opened her mouth and timidly, sweetly, begged for entrance.

Rees had always known he was no gentleman. And he'd known for years that he had no control around his wife either. Nothing seemed to have changed. He plunged into her mouth so violently that she toppled backwards into a bed of flowers and he came with her, his limbs tangling with hers, devouring her mouth.

All the while, some part of him was waiting for her to tear her mouth away, to push him away, to scream that he was depraved, disgusting

But the only thing that happened was that slender arms wound around

his neck and a slender body tucked itself into the hard curves of his body with such melting softness that he could barely stop himself from groaning with the pure delight of it.

An offer too hot to resist!

USA Today bestselling author of *A Wild Pursuit*

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WICKED WAYS

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